

Sermon Proper 7 Year C, 2025; Gospel: Luke 8: 26-39

In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Christ Within

The Rev. Dr. John Philip Newell was an ordained priest in the Church of Scotland. He is a scholar, a teacher and popular speaker, a poet, and author of several books mostly dealing with Celtic Spirituality. We recently studied his most recent book The Great Search in our contemplative prayer class here at All Saints. The foundational faith of Celtic spirituality is that God is present in each of us—all people—and also in every created thing. All of creation is sacred, including the Earth and everything in it. While driving home from a recent trip Cynthia and I listened to a podcast interview of Newell, in which he talked about the sacred in all of life, that God is present in all things. He referred to St. Julian of Norwich, the 14th century English mystic who was one of the first people to refer to God the Creator as both father and mother, and quoted her as saying that “all people are made *of* God, not simply from God.” In other words, God is not some transcendent thing that created the world—including us—from some remote place using some kind of foreign material. Rather, God created the world by emptying God’s self into it. The word for this is *kenosis*, a self-emptying. Seeing this “God-presence” within one another—that being all people and all of creation—offers a possibility and a hope for radically changing how we see and act in the world, how we relate to one another and to the earth, how we live our lives. Seeing the world this way can help restore within us our true identity, as we heard in Paul’s words today in his letter to the Galatians “you are all children of God...all of you are one in Christ.” And yet, for some reason it is hard to believe and to know and to accept this reality of God being present in each of us, this sacredness of all created things. Why is that? We will get to that, but first let’s look at today’s gospel about Jesus healing the unfortunate obviously ill and challenged Gerasene man. Remember that this man is a Gentile who lives

“opposite Galilee,” that being in a territory outside of Israel, the message here being that no one is beyond the reach of Christ. All are included.

Although the story has an uplifting ending, it is a sad account on several levels. First, when Jesus asks his name the man replies that he really has no name, only that he is “Legion,” that is “a multitude.” Oppressed by what the author calls too many demons to count, he has lost himself in the noise of their many voices, and has ceased being a self, an individual, a person. Hence he spends his days raving alone in the wilderness, unclothed, without a home, living among the tombs of the dead, a danger to himself and others, often bound with chains and shackles by the people of the town. And then Jesus heals him! If we consider that the word “resurrection” means a restoration to dignity, to “stand with dignity,” then this is a resurrection scene. Yet another even more troubling element of the story is the reaction of the townspeople when Jesus heals—when he resurrects—this disturbed, lonely man. Not only are they not overjoyed, but upon seeing him now restored to his true identity, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, they are “seized with great fear,” and ask Jesus to leave them, to get out our their town: “Go away Jesus, we don’t want you here.” What is going on here? Jesus has healed this unfortunate man of his illness, and yet the people seem to prefer that he would not be changed, not be healed. They seem to be more comfortable with things just as they were before. Now that he has been healed what will happen? Do they really want this previously dirty and dangerous man to be living among them as their neighbor? It seems that indeed we do sometimes prefer the troubles we know to changes we do not know. There in front of them was a demonstration of God’s presence and power to heal, and yet they wanted Jesus to go away. It seems that people didn’t recognize God even though they saw God in action with their own eyes. If they couldn’t see God in this powerful healing, then they certainly didn’t see the sacred presence of God within this

demon-possessed man. I suspect that they didn't see God's presence within themselves either.

And do we? Do we see the sacred in all things? In ourselves? There are so many things that get in the way, so many "demons" that separate us from our true selves in God. Doubts and fear, financial worries and job security, illness, the senseless violence in our world. The day-to-day details of life itself distract us from our true identities, from seeing God in ourselves, in one another, and in all created things. Yes, the Celtic Spirituality of seeing the sacred in all people, so well explained and modeled by John Philip Newell, can be difficult.

I think part of the problem, sadly, is with some of the generally accepted doctrines and orthodoxy of the church that throughout the centuries have hindered us from seeing God in ourselves and in all people. One in particular has been especially difficult and harmful, that being the Doctrine of Original Sin promoted by Augustine in the 4th century. It is the doctrine that we are born sinful, that from birth we are somehow separated from God, even that we transmit this to our children. In other words this doctrine teaches that we are born in sin, in separation from God, rather than born of the goodness and love of God. Implicit in this theology is that God had to send Jesus on a rescue mission to make things right, and further that he would ultimately have to be murdered on a cross to save us. Newell's description of that doctrine is that it is a perverse "sick" way of seeing ourselves and of seeing God. Yet we see it over and over again in our liturgy and our hymns. The Prayer of Humble Access in Our Holy Eucharist Rite I reads, "We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness,... We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table." I can imagine starting every conversation I have with Cynthia by saying "I am a worthless sinner, unfit for love, not worthy of your forgiveness." She may like hearing that one time, but if I said it every day what would that do to our relationship? She may actually start

believing it! I believe this doctrine as well as others about God have made it difficult to know the real God, from being able to see God in each other and in ourselves. Matthew Fox, at one time a Roman Catholic priest, offered a different way of knowing God. Rather than Original Sin he calls it Original Blessing, the idea that we are all born into union with God, in no way separate from God. This theology was considered too radical for the Roman Catholic Church. He wrote a book called Original Blessing for which he was censured by the Vatican, which officially “silenced” him. He then became an Episcopal Priest! If you have ever held a newborn baby in your arms, looked into her eyes, watched her chest expand as she takes the life-giving breath around her into her lungs, felt and listened to her heart beating, then you have seen God within her. You have seen the wonder and the miracle of new life, of God once again revealed into the world. Cynthia and I have been blessed with four of these occasions. Holding each of our newborn children was a sacred encounter. The birth of every child, indeed of each created thing, is the most recent revelation of the ongoing kenosis of God. There is no separation from God there, no “original sin.”

The recently deceased Episcopal Bishop and author John Shelby Spong wrote his final book Unbelievable as an appeal to show why much of the dogma of the church is no longer believable to people, especially young people, and why we need a new reformation to make Christianity meaningful again. He discusses what he calls his twelve theses that need to be understood differently for the church to continue to have meaning—things like original sin, the virgin birth, resurrection, the ascension, miracles, and others. He says that it is partly because of this dogma that many people have not learned to see the true message of the Christ within themselves and others. Our creeds, some based on scripture, often reflect a literal reading of scripture, and miss the greater truth to which these stories point. These stories do not require a factual, literal, historical reading in order to hold the underlying truth they point to. I truly

believe that it does not matter whether these stories are factually and historically true—that is beside the point. They hold truth, and that truth can help us to see and know the Christ. As an example, look at virgin birth. Was Mary really a virgin? I don't know, but the scientist within me says probably not. But it doesn't matter if she was or not! What matters is the question it asks each of us, the challenge it offers, the truth it points to. Can we empty ourselves in such a way that we become vessels that give birth to the Christ within us? Can we be the "theotokas," the God-bearer, in much the same way that Mary became when she said "yes?" That, I think, is the real meaning within the story, the real question.

The word "revelation" means to remove the veil, that being the veil that separates us from God's presence. Jesus was the great revelation, as we saw in our story about the Gerasene man today. Jesus removed the veil of demons that covered up the true identity of that suffering man, and he was made whole. We too need that veil to be lifted, to reveal us for who we truly are, to reveal the God within us, that we are not born soaked in sin but rather soaked in goodness. When we have that encounter with the sacred, with God, those things which torment us—those things which keep us like the Gerasene man shackled—fall away. Those demons will be exposed, and hopefully removed, revealing our true identity, parts of this amazing creation within which God resides.

I will close with a summation. We live in a spirit-soaked world, a sacred creation in Richard Rohr's words "pregnant with God." Everything is in some way a sacrament. For us to see this reality depends upon us to open our spiritual hearts and our spiritual eyes. And it is not difficult. It happens in as Frederick Buechner puts it "the remarkable ordinary" events of our everyday lives. As we read about the prophet Elijah in the 1 Kings reading today, God's voice came to him not in extraordinary events, not the sensational—not the wind or the earthquake or the fire—but rather in the "sound of sheer silence." Let's

take time out from the often frenzied pace of our lives and embrace the stillness and silence. Listen for God there. Remember these words of Jesus in the gospel of Thomas: “lift up the stone, and there you shall find me, cleave the wood, and I am there.” Let’s open our spiritual eyes. Look for the Christ in all things. The Spirit is alive within you and within all of creation.

Rev. Bob Donnell

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