

Second Sunday after Pentecost - June 19, 2022

There is a wonderful healing story here that occurs on the shores of Lake Galilee.

But there's also an incomplete one, a healing that is still in progress. Work — sacred work, even — that is left unfinished.

If it were a fairy tale written by Mother Goose, all would have lived happily ever after from that point on, and it would be a wrap.

But we all know real life doesn't work that way. At least not often enough that one should ever begin to count on it. The man who at first glance appears to be a new man, fully healed, freed from his chains, freed from the demons who tormented him ... there's still something not quite right.

He wants desperately to leave with Jesus. Now the pious-minded reason for that would be his deep gratitude to

the Jewish stranger for his healing and an instant longing to follow at his footsteps, to learn and to become a disciple of the Lord. But honestly, that sounds just a bit too much like the fairy tales to my mind.

I think he's still very afraid. And I think he wants very badly to escape. Because his mind and body are healed but what is left to be done won't happen in a quick moment.

The long-demon-possessed man is restored by Jesus but he is not yet reconciled to the community in which he lives.

He isn't greeted with a joyous celebration by his neighbors but with unease, fear ... and even the appropriation of his story by others. The hardest work still remains in the days, even years, ahead.

Because for the Gerasene community, this man was a problem. And they'd worked up a way to deal with the problem. But like many human solutions to soul-deep problems, they managed a skin-deep solution. Shackles and

chains that dug into this man's flesh but didn't truly hold him. And we are told he would break loose from them and his demons would drive him into the wild. That was acceptable to the Gerasenes because they didn't live in the wild. Evidently the man would come back and could just be restrained again until next time.

For all the trouble this caused, at least they had an understanding.

But then Jesus comes along. And it's without a doubt that he comes with a fresh set of eyes on this situation.

These are not his people, these are Gentiles and the difference in customs is evident from the word Go. As in Go from him, you demons, and where they go is not an option in a Jewish society, this swine herd.

This is one of few times when Jesus seeks out Gentiles in his ministry. He encounters Samaritans, kind of the estranged cousins of the Jews, and Romans, yes. But the lectionary has shown us in recent weeks, the expansion of

the church to the Greeks and Romans and others without Jewish origins doesn't begin in earnest until after Pentecost and Peter's Holy Spirit-driven encounter with Cornelius.

But whatever his reasons, Jesus seeks out this particular town and looks upon their status quo and says this won't do. And he heals ... but in doing so, he disrupts. And he knows his limits. As an outsider, he only has so much leeway before "He's not one of us" is reason enough to reject whatever else he may have to offer, regardless of whether it's for the best or not.

Jesus leaves this community with so much still left to reckon with. The pig farmers are pretty upset, which can be expected when their means of making a living have just been sunk, literally. But unaccustomed to this kind of a disaster, they seem to panic and rush to take control of the narrative. They go about the land telling the story of what has taken place from their perspective and that's the story that folks hear and that scares them. So quickly the people can

compensate, stabilize without having to change too much, and transfer culpability from one strange man to another, more foreign stranger. While still possessed, I'm willing to bet that man got out into the wild and slaughtered a few free-range pigs here and there, every now and again. But he could be captured, cursed and re-shackled again. Now Jesus has come and demonstrated he can come and bring about the loss of thousands of livestock in an afternoon and ... well, he's not from around here. He needs to go. But he can be blamed from some time after he's gone and then what? Calamity will come again. Who will be the next scapegoat? There always seems to be one to be found...

If the healed man had left, with Jesus or otherwise, he could have resumed that role. "Ugh, all that and you know he just went out there somewhere else and went wild again. Somebody else's problem now," the story might be told at the marketplace. "Sure did cause us a mess though and we're still recovering from it..."

But even as Jesus departed, he did so with wisdom. As he is wont to do.

He sent the right-headed man, freed of his demons, back home to tell his story. To counter the narrative. To look his neighbors in his community, face-to-face, eye-to-eye and challenge them. To make them reckon with the notion that he is not a problem to be solved, to be contained, to be managed or dealt with. But that he is a child of God, loved by God, a full human being, set free in Jesus' name.

As hard a mission as that might be, when Jesus called him to it, he took it on. And we don't hear the end of the story. Rather we must live it out.

This day, June 19, in the year of our Lord 2,022, it's a holiday new to a lot of our calendars. The African American Lectionary worship resource notes that on this date in 1865, the people of Texas learned that the Civil War had ended and slaves had gained their freedom. Major General Gordon Granger, the leader of the Union troops, issued General

Order Number 3, emancipating the last 250,000 slaves who remained captive despite President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

Justice was delayed but ultimately not denied.

The name Juneteenth may capture the excitement those slaves felt. According to the "Queen's English," the celebration should be called "June Nineteenth." But when chains of captivity fell from their bodies and souls, their tongues were not concerned about grammar. Newfound freedom prompted the creation of a new word, "Juneteenth."

See on that day 157 years ago, people in this country freed from shackles and chains begin to tell their story in their own words, in their own way. And polite white society often hasn't wanted to hear it. The narrative has shifted through the year ... that we could be separate but equal, and clearly that didn't work. That the redlining practices of the 1940s don't leave a legacy today and the civil rights

legislation of the 1960s wiped the slate clean. That we can ignore the cry that Black Lives Matter because we know that all lives matter. Problem solved.

But this day, and hopefully every day, we can begin anew to listen to the voices of people who are not a problem to be solved but who are God's children: restored, yes, but not fully reconciled. And we can resist the temptation to seek to maintain a certain order, to patch over the troubles of the past ... but rather to be reconciled in Christ.

That doesn't happen an instant.

But I do have faith it is indeed meant to be a healing story and we can play a major role in it.

Hard work, yes, but sacred work.

This Juneteenth, this is the day that the Lord has made.

Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen.