Second Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Threshold”* Luke 8:26-39

Sometimes, it feels like life is one big series of “thresholds,” one long chain of entrances and exits, of being on the outer most edge of one place and on the brink of “the next thing”—the next room, the next day, the next chapter of life—*new* life.

The people in the story we just heard were all standing on the threshold of new life—all of them except Jesus and the man who had been possessed by demons. The two of *them* had already crossed over their thresholds.

Jesus had crossed the Galilee and had stepped out of the boat onto land occupied by *non*-Jews, by Gentiles. Normally, an observant Jew would carefully avoid such places lest they come into contact with something considered “unclean,” like a herd of pigs, and a man who lived in a cemetery. Both things were considered unclean and were to be avoided.

Jesus, out of his desire to touch all people with compassion and mercy, foresaw the day when the love of God would bring an end to such divisions, and instead, bring people together in one community. For Jesus, there were *no* divisions, no dividing lines between people. There were only people in need; people he wanted to bring closer to the powerful love of God.

As for the demoniac—let’s talk about him a little later. What I would like to do right now is to see if we can take the story we just heard and let it speak to us about a threshold we are standing on right now—a threshold that has us—Nu’uanu Congregational Church—standing and peering into something new.

Specifically, I would like to tell you about an experience I, and all of us who attended the 200th ‘Aha Pae’aina—especially yesterday’s introduction of a “resolution of witness” on the subject of gun violence.

The resolution was brought forward by Central Union church, and it asks each of the UCC churches in the Hawaii Conference to find a way to have church and community-wide discussions about the tragedies involving gun violence that continue to plague our country, our communities, our neighbors.

We have been asked to engage in deep, meaningful, theological conversations about the way so many of our families and neighborhoods are being torn apart. We are asked to have *sacred* conversations about these things, which is to say: we are to bring all of the love and power of God’s love into our conversations. Into these conversations that we can have about healing and wholeness in our communities.

“Each church is called to pursue a course of action that best fits its skills, capabilities, and understanding.” That’s from the resolution!

The resolution lifts up the fact that from January through May of this year, our nation has averaged more than one mass shooting per day, and that in those same five months, more than 400 children and nearly 2,000 teenagers were injured by firearms.

Two years ago, in 2020, the Center for Disease Control reported over 45-thousand-gun related deaths—an increase of some 25% from the previous year. These days, death by gun violence is now the leading cause of death among children.

Whenever numbers like that are posted, I have a tendency to see the faces of the children I have known, the children of this church.

Such numbers suggest a moral crisis. However, the good news is that churches are uniquely equipped to respond to “moral crises.” *We* are uniquely well equipped to respond to this tragedy with acts of caring and creativity that may light the way toward a new age, and a world of greater peace and safety for our children…and for *all* people.

Change really does begin with a commitment to face up to a problem, to struggle with it, to struggle with one another as we all share ideas for change that can come from our finest hopes and dreams for our families and communities. Righteous and lasting change comes when we allow God to speak to our hearts, and instead of shrugging it off and muttering something about having to live “in the *real* world,” we obey God’s calling to something higher, better, finer.

At the same time, I will acknowledge that we are moving into foreign territory with many unknown twists and turns. But this does not have to make us afraid or prevent us from moving forward. We need not be discouraged or overwhelmed by the prospect of such deep and sacred conversations and commitments.

Instead, know that this is what Jesus did when he crossed the Galilee to go among the Gentiles. He is our example, our model, and our inspiration.

Jesus knew that his own disciples were probably reluctant to follow him into such a place and among such people. He knew some of them probably misunderstood his motives and intentions. Some may even have disagreed with his decision.

Only after God’s power overcame the evil that wracked the demoniac’s body were those who loved him able to see and appreciate what had happened. Indeed, that was an important part of Jesus’ mission: to show the world the power of God’s desire to make all things new and good. Jesus’ mission was to show the power of God’s love to us, and to make us understand that *we* are also the recipients of God’s love. And as we are the recipients of God’s love, we are also the recipients of God’s power to heal, to make whole, and to have life.

*We* have the power to cross the threshold that divides the violence and destruction we know, and step into a world of hope, a world where we speak and dream, and join with all others who striving toward peace, calm, and wholeness. All of these things are what God’s love can bring forth in our lives together. And together, as we help and share with one another, we can find a way out of the destruction that continues to plague us.

That brings us back to the demoniac. In order to turn our attention back to him, we need to acknowledge that talking about demons is not easy in this day and age. While most of us accept that there is evil in the world, as modern people it is difficult for us to conceptualize evil as a boogey-man like creature.

We are most comfortable talking about mental illness or instability. We prefer to reference the breakdown and loss of traditional values, and social systems. These days, we lay a lot wrong and corruption at the feet of social media use, and yes, with justification. But while this is an enlightened approach, we need to also come to grips with the way in which evil is experienced by the victims who find themselves caught-up in the maelstrom of evil and its activity.

And I find what helps me connect to their reality is the traditional definition and description of demon possession. There are three points to remember about demon possession:

1. The demon possessed will suffer and commit self-destructive acts.
2. The victim will feel trapped and unable to rid him/herself of the torment.
3. The possession causes separation between the victim and the rest of his/her family and community.

When I looked at these three points, I saw myself, and all of us. I did not see a demon, but I did see and experience the way we are all caught up in the self-destructive acts of mass killing—usually some form of gun violence.

I experienced my own feelings of being overwhelmed and trapped in a continuing story of gun violence that does not change. The location changes, but the carnage remains the same.

I experienced the threat of separation from hope that things can change; the despair of finding that the violence often threatens to hide the loving face of Christ from me.

And then I remember, or read, or hear proclaimed this passage from the Gospel of Luke, and I remember that our lives are filled with the powerful love of God, and that *this* is the power that can and will drive out the demons that have attacked the body of Christ throughout the world. I remember that Jesus never lingered on thresholds, but quickly stepped across them to get to you and to me, and all of us. I remember that God’s Spirit is the fresh winds of inspiration that we need and which is always available to us.

I will bring this sermon to a close with the closing lines of the theological rationale found in the resolution. Here is what is written:

*as a denomination, we believe that the Holy Spirit works through each community, each individual, according to their abilities, and weaves our efforts together for good (Romans 8:28). Together, by God’s grace, we can end cycles of violence. Together, we can promote the healing of individuals and communities (Ephesians 2:10). Together, we long for God’s good shalom. For we have learned that true peace is not the absence of conflict – it is the presence of justice.*

Holding fast to the promises of God, I look forward to discovering with you the ways in which we can contribute to this pursuit of God’s love and justice and peace. Amen.