

THE FAR SIDE

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, JUNE 23, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

LUKE 8:26-39

This morning's sermon title is borrowed from a newspaper cartoon. Remember *THE FAR SIDE?*

A fellow named Gary Larson drew that single-panel comic from 1980 until 1995, and it seems impossible to realize it has been gone for that long. It was a comic of surrealistic humor, based on uncomfortable social situations, improbable events, logical fallacies, bizarre disasters, and the search for the meaning of life.

All in all, Gary Larson took us on a strange journey. The journey included philosophizing cows, talking gargoyles, families of chickens driving automobiles, and an incredible cast of almost human animals, and almost human humans.

Gary Larson has written that "strange journeys begin in different ways: Alice fell through the looking glass, Dorothy got swept away by a tornado, and I got kicked in the head by a cow."

The short trip that Jesus made with His disciples in that small boat was a strange journey. It was a journey to the far side. And it included surrealistic humor, uncomfortable social situations, improbable events, logical fallacies, bizarre disasters, and the search for the meaning of life.

Jesus was exhausted. He needed a rest, a respite, and could not escape the crowds that followed him around the Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Geneseret. The Gerasenes were the Gentiles, the foreigners, the strangers, who lived on the far side of the body of water that so many of the stories of the New Testament revolve around. But our text this morning is the only journey to the fat side.

Jesus went there hoping to get some rest, some peace and quiet, but instead, the instant that He stepped ashore, He is confronted with a naked man, who lived in the caves where the dead were entombed, and was possessed by demons. That is the kind of thing one encounters on the far side.

But even stranger, this demoniac, this man possessed, knew Jesus, recognized Him as the Son of the Most High God. And if the man himself did not know who Jesus was, at least the spirits that tormented him did. And the spirit identified itself as "Legion", for there were many of them. (A Roman legion was six thousand soldiers!)

Stranger still, the spirits beg Jesus not to send them back into the abyss, into the great dark unknown from whence they came. They ask Him for mercy.

What follows is consistent with our journey to the far side: there are pigs, hogs, swine, grazing on the hillside, accompanied by herders. Obviously, these folks aren't Jewish. They don't keep kosher. They are grazing pigs, and probably planning on having pork chops, bacon, ham, sausage, all of the wonderful things we enjoy that come from swine, that Orthodox Jews have never known, and don't you feel sorry for them for that?

In an act that can only be seen as compassionate to the demons, Jesus gave them permission to enter the pigs. But in one of those twists that occur on the far side, the hogs then run down the bank, into the lake, where they drown.

The herders rush to tell the tale, the people come out to see the disaster, and find the demonic, the wild man of the tombs, sitting at the feet of Jesus, fully clothed and in his right mind.

And their response to this? They are afraid and they ask Jesus to leave their country.

Remember, the far side is a place of uncomfortable social situations, improbable events and logical fallacies.

There is one more: the man wants to come with Jesus, to follow Him. Instead, Jesus tells him to stay on the far side, and to tell everyone how much God has done for him, and he did.

Ponder this: Jesus sends out a wild man, a former demoniac, as the first missionary, as the first evangelist, and He sends him to the far side of the lake, away from the people to whom Jesus has been preaching and ministering. And added irony, Jesus has been telling all those whom he has healed on the right side of the lake to keep quiet, to keep their miraculous healings to themselves!

Let's take a look at what this has to say to us today, in the 21st century.

First, there are a whole lot of people who are like the Gerasenes: they are telling Jesus to go away and leave them alone.

Jesus disturbs people. Jesus afflicts people where they live, how they live, even how they make their living. If Jesus says to someone, "You must give up your bad habits, you must change your life, you must stop doing the things that you enjoy doing, that bring you pleasure, but are sinful," chances are that person is going to tell Jesus to go away. If you or I as a Christian friend say those things to one of our friends, to a co-worker, they are probably going to tell us to mind our own business. Ever watch the television program "Intervention"? No one wants to be told they have to give up their addictions, their bad habits, their evil ways.

If Jesus says to an employer, a businessman, a factory owner, "You can't be a Christian and make people work under the conditions that exist, or for the wages you pay," that man is going to tell Jesus to go away. And if we as Christians say that we will be told to mind our own business. We Presbyterians have been very outspoken in the last decade or so in support of the Farmworkers of South Florida, who are still picking tomatoes today for the same wages they received forty years ago. We've boycotted Taco Bell, and lobbied other fast food franchisers, and are presently engaged in dialogue with the Publix grocery store chain over the issue of fair wages for farm workers. And we've been told to go away, that labor relations and practices are not the church's business.

If Jesus says to a landlord, "You can't charge the rent you charge, and continue to allow people to live in slums, in squalor, in dilapidated, run down housing," that person is going to tell Jesus to go away. And if we as Christians speak out against slumlords, we are told to mind our own business.

But we are called to care for people, for persons, for individuals, and as old William Barclay once said, "No thing in this world can ever be as important as a person."

But what about the person in this story?

Jesus healed him, cured him, cast the demons that possessed him out of him, took him from a naked wanderer in the land of the dead, violent, raging, and turned him into a man in his right mind, clothed like his peers, sitting at the feet of Jesus, learning of Him.

And when he wanted to go with Jesus, Jesus sent him home.

That may have been the hardest thing Jesus could have done to him. To send him home. Back to the far side. To the people who knew and feared, maybe even mocked and ridiculed him.

Old William Barclay has something to say about this. He wrote: "Christian witness, like Christian charity, begins at home. It would be so much easier to live and speak for Christ among people who do not know us. It is our duty, where Christ has set us, there to witness for Him. And if it should happen that we are the only Christian in the shop, the office, the school, the factory, the circle in which we live or work, that is not a matter for lamentation. It is a challenge to us in which God says, 'Go and tell the people you meet every day what I have done for you.'" *The Gospel of Luke, p. 109*

Go and tell the people you meet every day what God has done for you.

Let us pray.

O God of the far side and of home, help us first of all to realize what you have done for us: that you have saved us from our sins, that you have promised us life everlasting, that you have given us the hope of heaven. Many of us have stories to tell of how you have healed us of our afflictions, of how you have given us strength for the journey, of how you have comforted us in our sorrows, of how you have blessed us and changed us in our lives. Help us to go and tell the people we meet every day what You have done for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.