Sermon – Luke 8:26-39
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
5 Pentecost – Year C
19 June 2016

"A Love Stronger Than Evil"

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Earlier this week, I was kindly reminded by Facebook that it was a year ago that our family made the trip to Grace for my final interview for the position of Senior Pastor. By the end of that weekend, you had voted to call me, for which I continue to give thanks to God and to you. Thinking about all that's transpired since that time, I am filled with gratitude. I am also well aware that I occupy an office of distinction, following in the footsteps of servant pastors who have been faithful in their proclamation of the gospel and their love for God's people. But I do like to think I've put my own stamp on the role of Senior Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church & School. For example, I'm guessing – though I don't know for sure – that I'm the first Senior Pastor to capture a chipmunk in the building and have a video of my daring deed shared on social media. I'm also guessing – although again, I could be wrong – that I'm the first Senior Pastor to dress up in a full Chewbacca costume to entertain our schoolchildren at their annual Walk-a-thon. Most of the kids found this to be great fun; after all, who doesn't love Chewbacca? Well, I'll tell you who: Torsten. Our little boy was terrified of me. I finally had to go over to him, break character, and whisper, "It's okay, buddy. It's not real. It's me, daddy." That helped, although there seems to be some toddler post-Chewbacca stress disorder lingering for him. He'll still say, seemingly out of nowhere, (in Torsten's voice), "I don't like Chewbacca daddy."

2. It's okay, buddy. It's not real. I find myself saying these words often to our children. When Darth Vader comes onto the screen; when our daughter imagines that there could be a fire in the house; when our sons see monsters in every shadowy corner at bedtime. It's okay – it's not real. These words from me or their mother help. They trust us, still, in their youthfulness. Saying, "It's okay, it's not real," reshapes their reality, bringing them back to peace and calm. But what about when it's not okay? What about when it *is* real, and no pretending otherwise, no calm words of parental assurance, can change the fact that evil is real, that evil still stalks our world and lives in our sinful hearts? What then?

3. We live in a world in which evil is real. We were reminded of this painful fact last week, waking to horrible news on Sunday morning, when evil showed up for over 300 people at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando. A man arrived at the nightclub in the early hours of the morning, armed, as you know, with a semiautomatic rifle and a semiautomatic pistol. Over the next three hours, he would violently murder 49 people and injure 53 others before he was killed by police. Evil was present at Pulse in the demonic forms of gun violence, religious extremism, and virulent hatred toward an already-marginalized community, our fellow humans who are gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual. It was the largest terrorist attack in the U.S. since 9/11. Evil was there that night, and I wish I could make it go away with some simple, reassuring words, but I can't. So what then do we say?

4. In the course of his ministry, Jesus brought the good news of the Kingdom of God into this darkened world. Jesus met evil, and evil knew exactly who Jesus was and why he had come. In the country of the Gerasenes, Jesus met a man who knew evil, for it lived inside him, consuming him, dehumanizing him, possessing him to the point that he had to be kept shackled in the tombs outside the city. Chained among the tombs; this man was as good as dead. Until he met Jesus; until the Legion of demons inside him met Jesus. And

Legion cowered in fear, because the demons knew they had no hope against the Son of God who was bringing hope to the chained and forgotten in this world. The demons are sent flying into a herd of swine who then hurtle to their demise. The man, however, was free. Finally free. Free to go home again. Free from the barriers that kept him separate from his family and community. Free to be human, made in the image of God and redeemed by the loving power of Jesus. Free.

5. So what do we say when evil is all too real? Jesus tells the man freed from demons and division to go home and declare all that God has done for him. And that's what the man does. And that is what Jesus calls us to do, not trusting in our own words, but in the very Word of God who was born of Mary and who walked among us, breaking chains, forgiving sins, destroying barriers, and bringing peace. This is the Word we are called to speak. This is the Word, crucified and raised again, in whom we find our hope, through whom we are given life, and from whom we hear our calling.

6. So what do we say this week? We speak peace in the face of escalating violence, acknowledging the deeply rooted causes of violence and imaging together the Kingdom that Jesus is creating – one rooted in peace, life, and community as values that shape how we think about guns. We speak peace to those who speak evil to us, seeking to understand people of other faiths even as we stand against radical interpretations of those faiths. And, in the wake of the attack at Pulse, we speak peace to those whose sexual orientation or gender identity may be different from our own. I am thankful that we are engaging this conversation at Grace. And frankly, I don't know where this conversation will end. That's what dreaming and discernment in the Holy Spirit is all about, after all; you don't always know where you're going. But I do know where I believe it has to begin, at least for me. In our reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians this morning, we hear that "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into

Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Where do we begin? By acknowledging that, apart from Christ, we are all like the man in the country of the Gerasenes: chained, naked, and as good as dead. But now, by the grace of God, we who were chained are freed and restored to our communities; we who were naked have been clothed in Christ; we who were dead are alive. And this is no less true for gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual persons that it is true for me, or for any of you. We were all made in the image of God; we are all saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are all invited to be together in Christ, gathered around font and table, a community that is united by the simple fact that God says we are together in Christ, even if we don't much feel like it, even when we disagree about matters of scriptural interpretation or confessional identity. These are important conversations, and no doubt we all have much to learn. But even so, we are called to find ways to live out this reality with which we have been gifted.

7. This begins and ends with Jesus, the only One who can grant us hope in the face of despair, forgiveness in the face of sin, peace in the face of evil, and life in the face of death. For this is true for all of us. All of us, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity or anything else, for that matter. Because Christ has reclaimed all of us for God. In Jesus, there are no longer "others." We are not us and them. We are we. And if this is true, then we are called in Christ to stand with those at the margins, those who suffer hate and violence and oppression. If this is true, we are called to welcome all of God's children as we have been welcomed. And finally, what do we say after Orlando? I have no words that suffice after such evil, but Jesus does. Jesus is the Word of Life that is quite simply enough for us, for all of us. May we love one another and all people in this world, trusting in Jesus, this Word of God that will never let us go, and that sends us out into this world with the good news that it so deeply needs.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.