

Year C, June 23, 2019
2 Pentecost (Proper 7)
Christ Church, Mexia

On their way to get married, a young couple was involved in a fatal car accident and they found themselves at the gates of heaven waiting to be processed by St. Peter. While waiting, they began to wonder whether or not they could be married in heaven. So when St. Peter showed up, they asked him. St. Peter said, "I don't know. This is the first time anyone has asked that. Let me go and find out," and he leaves.

The two of them sit and wait, and wait some more – hours, days, weeks. Two months pass and the couple is still waiting. As they wait, they discuss marriage in heaven – what if they discover they don't like each other – will they be stuck together forever?

After another month, St. Peter finally returns, looking somewhat bedraggled. "Yes," he informs the couple, "you CAN get married in heaven."

"Great," says the couple, "but we were just wondering – what if things don't work out? Can we get a divorce in heaven?"

St. Peter, red-faced with anger, slams his clipboard onto the ground. "What's wrong?" asks the frightened couple. "Oh, come on!" St. Peter shouts, "It took me three months to find a priest up here! Do you have any idea how long it'll take to find a lawyer?"

A funny story... but like the scripture readings today, it has meaning. It has elements of fear and concern for liberation, for example. And it is a particularly good time to speak of liberation as we just celebrated the oldest event commemorating the abolishment of slavery in the United States – Juneteenth. Interestingly, it was two and one-half years after the Emancipation Proclamation and a little over two months after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox before word "officially" reached Texas. Of course, liberation produces its own anxieties. What is the formally oppressed supposed to do when liberated?

While jubilant, former slaves now had to decide what to do with their freedom. Do we stay with the former owners in a new relationship employer and employee? How will we feed ourselves, where should we go, if we don't stay?

Though we have been liberated from one fear or condition that oppresses us, others may replace them. We see it in the story of the demoniac today. We have seen it in other stories from the Bible, like the Exodus from Egypt. Sure, there is joy at being set free, but then reality can take over – or rather the unknown. The Jews knew what it was like in Egypt; yes, it was hard and demeaning. But now how will they find water and food? Where will they go? The unknown can be daunting.

The demoniac had lived in the tombs among the dead and he might as well have been dead. No one remembered his name, not even him, apparently. He had been neglected, shamed, treated with indifference because of his mental illness, his inability to conform to society. It has been so long since he knew love and compassion, or decency or caring that he resists being healed. Leave me alone, please, Jesus. I know who you are, but I don't want your help.

But the ministry of Jesus is about freedom and liberation. In all of the stories about his healing miracles, he is freeing them. It isn't just a physical cure of the ailment. There is usually something else involved, like freedom from social stigma or freedom from the way they view themselves. So, Jesus liberates the man from the things that control him. And Jesus can liberate us from the "demons" that torment us.

We don't think much about demons today, not like they did back then. But we all have them. And they control our lives, control how we feel about ourselves and others, control how we see our future, and control how we behave. Whether money or lack thereof, physical appearance, position in a perceived hierarchy or society in general, perceived lack of time, embarrassment over some failure, racism, sexism, alcoholism or other addiction, xenophobia, fear of death - the list is legion, so to speak. We all have one or more of them. But the power of God in Christ can tame or exorcise our demons, whatever they may be, if we'll let it.

But then what? The former demoniac wanted to stay with Jesus, stay in the security of being with him, cutting himself off from the world that had been hurtful to him, staying with the familiar. But Jesus says no. Go back and proclaim how much God has done for you. That's not what we want to hear! But now we know. Share our experience so that we may help others.

The Rev. James Liggett, commenting on the related reading in Paul's letter to the Galatians, says: "This is part of what Paul is talking about

when he insists that, in Christ, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.' Paul is saying that these distinctions, and others, these powers of the social, economic, ecclesiastical, and political structures – as ancient, hallowed, destructive, and potent as they were, as they are – these are powers that will fall, and that have fallen, before Jesus. Their voices are not the strongest voices, and they will not have the last word. It is our vocation (as Christians) to oppose them, and by God's grace they should not, and ultimately they cannot, separate, isolate, define, or destroy us. ... Because the love that Jesus is, the love that Jesus brings, is stronger than anything, even the worst, the very worst that the world can throw at us."

I hope you got the message because the power of God in Christ can work for us, liberate us and then be shared by us with others - that's the good news for today.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen.