

A Glimpse of Jesus' Politics

A Reflection for June 19th, 2022

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+ Peace be with you!

As I have mentioned last Sunday, this month is loaded with many meanings, festivals, and celebrations. Our Region took the opportunity to make ourselves an Affirming Region. It doesn't happen overnight; it took three years of deliberations. It is a major step going forward, to show how we understand the call of the gospel, and to stand in solidarity with diverse people who have been misunderstood and unjustly oppressed. To the gay and lesbian communities, the church has much to repent, to learn from past mistakes, and together, we rebuild a better future. Same is said about Indigenous peoples and our relationship with them.

I don't know much about you, I came from a conservative Christianity. In that world, the gospel means believing Jesus as my personal saviour. It is all about me, whether I go to heaven or hell. I used to believe that the Christian message has nothing to do with politics. If it has anything to do with society, it is about condemning them as sinful. The God that I used to believe in cared only about whether I go to church or not, believe in Jesus or not.

Little did I know how much the gospel is about justice, about welcoming, and expanding our world. The Bible is rich in teaching social justice and standing in solidarity with all who have been oppressed. The gospel is about working toward a better society, to repair God's world, *Tikkun Olam*, a Jewish term I have introduced to you before.

Throughout my ministry and teaching, I have changed my understandings of the Bible, and faith many times. At the time I struggled with whether or not women should be allowed to be ordained, I encountered wonderful women preachers and ministers. At the time when I struggled with the issue of welcoming gays and lesbians, I encountered many wonderful friends, professors and ministers, who opened my eyes to see my own

arrogance. I am fortunate to be on the path where I needed to critique my own assumptions, to be open to change, and to work toward justice.

Today's text is a kind of a reminder to me at least, to see clearly the politics of Jesus. Today's texts come from Luke, but both Mark and Matthew also reported similar incident. This is a familiar story, but it is loaded with political meanings.

Luke says, "Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee." In Mark, "Jesus came to the other side of the sea."

Even the location is an interesting point for biblical study, because scholars cannot pin point where it was. Mark says, "as soon as he got out of the boat", he describes the place as being near the sea. But in ancient Israel's map, the Sea of Galilee did not have the two places mentioned above on the opposite side.

But Gerasa is more likely, and historically important. Historians say that the Jews in this area mercilessly killed before the birth of Jesus, as the villagers were hoping to drive out the Roman army. As a result, the Roman army destroyed the town, leaving a sad scar on the hearts of the people.

In Mark's account, a demon-possessed man came out to meet Jesus. In Roman times, it was common to describe the Roman rule as demonic or demonic. Jesus asked this unclean spirit, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is: Legion".

Legion is a unit of Roman army that was deployed in different cities. The Roman Empire was able to rule many places because they built roads and deployed these troops just outside of the cities they ruled. Each one had 2,068 Roman soldiers stationed in it. If there was a riot in the city, the Legion unit moved in fast to suppress the rioters.

The biblical stories say Jesus allowed the unclean spirit to go to the pigs and run off the cliff and drown them. Mark says that the number of pigs was about 2,000, which is the number of Romans' army deployed outside the city. Coincidence or hidden meaning implied?

If you were a Jewish folk in the 1st century, and if you were hearing this story for the first time, you would not be worried about whether this story was literally true or not, and whether there were really 2,000 pigs rushing off the cliff. You would not ask why Jesus would destroy someone's livelihood. Another interesting point for thought is Jews don't eat pork. For what reason did this household have that many pigs? The whole story is already unclean!

Instead, you would smile inwardly and be very happy. Because there is a hidden message in this story, that the Roman army that was deployed outside the city was about 2,000 strong, and they were all destroyed. If you were a Jew in the 1st century, that would make your day!

A while back I explained that the location of this event was not clear. This ambiguity is actually beneficial to the Gospel writers in retelling the story of Jesus. Because no one directly knew where Jesus was referring to. Yet, the common villagers would have understood the hidden meaning of this story.

Common villagers loved Jesus for this reason. That he had the gut to poke fun of the Roman empire without overtly saying so. He used code words, just like many people today living under cruel dictatorship.

Whether this story is literally about Jesus healing a demon-possessed friend, we don't know today. But what we do know is that Jesus consciously stabbed the Roman army, showing his political views and his willingness to stand among the suffering people.

When we read the Bible, we should not only look at the spiritual aspect of the individual, but also at the sinful structures of society as a whole. That's why we pick up anti-racism work, rebuilding relationship with Indigenous peoples, welcoming gays, lesbians, transgender folks. This is because the Bible's teaching on justice is very obvious. Through a rigorous study of the Bible, we know that God's concern is not only personal, but also political and institutional.

It is for this reason that I say that you are indeed a blessed group of people who are part of the United Church family. The characteristic of this denomination is that it does not want to give up or forget what the Bible teaches about social justice and caring for the poor. While everyone is talking about personal salvation, the United Church family does not forget the very obvious biblical teaching of caring for social justice and not forgetting to get involved in politics. We do it with careful study of God's Word and its context.

Now, what we need to do is to look for opportunities to live inclusive lives, to repent from past mistakes, and to find ways to be voices of hope. I pray that we wouldn't become pessimistic because of so much hurt and wrong in the world, instead, to be encouraged by the Spirit to say words of kindness, acts of justice, and be part of the positive forces that inspire love. Yes, it is not easy. The social environment may not be safe. But still, we learn from Jesus who found ways to bring hope to the people in his time. Let's not give up. This month is Indigenous history month and Pride month. Let's get on with it. Let's celebrate and then continue the good work. Amen.