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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
July 17, 2016
Luke 8: 26-39

It was a year ago this time that we as a congregation adopted our vision and mission statements along with the values that guide us as a congregation. As a reminder, our mission is to reflect and live God's love, accept and affirm all and inspire a passion to do God's work. Our values are:

- Accepting people for who they are and where they are on their faith journey.
- Growing in our faith by asking questions and wrestling with ambiguity.
- Serving others in the same way Christ served others.
- Welcoming young and old, singles and families, respectful of race, nationality, sexual orientation, and persons of differing abilities.

But it's the vision statement that resonates with me the most: to challenge the present to change the future to make Christ known. Last month, as I was getting ready to leave for the St. Charles Pride Fest, where the church had a booth, I thought to myself, especially in light of the Orlando shooting which happened just one week earlier – this is why we're going to Pride – to challenge the present: to let people know that there are churches that stand in solidarity with LGBTQ persons not because it's simply the right thing to do, but because it's the Christian thing to do; because it's what Jesus would do. And hopefully by saying that publicly we'll change the future into one where discrimination against LGBTQ people doesn't exist, so that Christ can be known – because it's hard to see Christ when your Facebook feed announces that a gunman killed 49 people in a gay nightclub in Orlando.

As I read that horrific headline last month while driving from Key Largo to home, passing the exit where the gunman lived, and then nearing Orlando around lunch time, I thought to myself, "Here we go again." How many times, Oh Lord, does this need to happen before we stand up and say enough, and do something about it. I quickly sent a text message to Tola, asking him to change the sign message, but struggled with what to say in just 5 short lines – because I didn't want to only say that we our thoughts and prayers are with Orlando, because truth be told I'm

tired of praying. I also somehow wanted to say, in just 5 short lines, that our prayers should lead to action. That we really are trying to challenge the present, to change the future, to make Christ known.

So/but how do we do that?

Well, we preach the gospel with our hands and feet, our words and actions. It sounds so obvious, so simple, but it's not. If it were, I wouldn't be preaching yet another sermon in response to a mass shooting. See, I think we believe in this false theology that teaches that Jesus' primary aim and motivation is to comfort us and make us feel better about ourselves. But friends, that's just not true. While Jesus certainly spent a great deal of time comforting the afflicted, as we see in today's story about the demon possessed man, he also spent a great deal of time afflicting the comfortable, as we see in today's story about the demon possessed man. So heads up, today's sermon might make you uncomfortable.

To be clear, Jesus did comfort and heal the man named Legion, who'd been locked up and carefully shackled by the townspeople so he wouldn't disturb them and their way of life. **But**, when Jesus set the man free, he set off a chain of events that left the people fearing for their lives. What should have been a celebratory occasion for the townspeople turned into a fearful situation for them. Jesus's action upsets their social and economic arrangements – which just goes to show that the gospel isn't always good news for everyone – and that the gospel can and does upset our economic and social arrangements *if we're paying close enough attention*.

While the townspeople may not have been able to cure the demon possessed man or contain him 100% of the time, at least they had control of the situation. But now Jesus comes along, enters their community, and disturbs it and their way of life. Jesus had the power of God, and it's not that the people didn't want to accept God's power, it's that they couldn't manage it, control it, or calculate it. God's power, even when used for the good of the community, is frightening. What will God do next in our community, the townspeople are left wondering. What will God do next? So they ask Jesus to leave, because they're scared. Jesus challenged their present in order to change their future to make God's kingdom-known, and it was too much for them.

And sometimes it's too much for us, too. While accepting the healing and salvation Christ offers seems so logical, our human instincts can often drive us in different directions. And our instincts often can, and do, drive us to fear what we don't know, can't control or don't understand.

In an essay published just a day after the Orlando shooting, Will Willimon wrote this about fear:

Neuroscience has copiously documented that fear is detrimental to reasonableness. As our level of fear goes up, powers of judgment, decision-making and evaluation go down. That's one reason why fear tends to be a function of our imagination more than the reality of our true situation, fear out of proportion to the threat of the object of our fear, fear that plays upon our insecurities and leads us to irrational response. There are now more guns than people in America. Limbic systems gone wild? *He asks.*

<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/6971/fearing-our-fears>

Friends, despite the Bible's admonition to tell us to "fear not" over 300 times, there is a deep seated fear in our country that is taking hold of us that if not challenged, will only end in more violence, hatred, and death – none of which make Christ known. Jesus said the two most important commandments are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets. But I would argue that we sure don't live like that, nor do our laws or our lawmakers govern like that.

Scott Bader-Saye, in his fine book [Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear](#) (Brazos, 2007), notes that the top killers in the United States are heart disease, cancer and stroke. Yet our top fears are terrorists, pedophiles, plane crashes. Though crime rates are dropping, two-thirds of us think they are rising. The population most fearful of victimization by violence (older adults) is least likely to be victimized by violent crime (young adult men are most vulnerable). A major justification for the purchase of a firearm is self-defense against bad people; most handgun deaths are gun accidents by a friend or family member, a domestic dispute or suicide by our own hand. Avid TV viewers are more likely than others to believe their

neighborhoods are unsafe, assume that crime rates are rising, and overestimate their odds of becoming a victim, and they are more likely to own guns.

Folks, the call of fear, hatred and revenge is tempting, corrosive, and loud and if we as a people of faith, the church, don't speak up and against it, things likely can and will get worse. As Bader-Saye says in his book, "For Christians, living too fearfully destroys our ability to trust in God and to love others and to practice basic Christian virtues: hospitality, peacemaking, and generosity."

Despite the fact that Jesus told us to turn our swords into ploughshares, and if guns are anything they are our modern day swords, our lawmakers are unable and unwilling to even discuss let alone pass sensible gun laws that will keep weapons of mass destruction such as an AR-15 out of dangerous hands. Since 1998, the NRA has donated almost \$4 million dollars to members of congress, according to the Washington Post. The lawmaker receiving the most money of all is Sen. Roy Blunt – just over \$60,000.

And yes, these donations are influential. [According to the NRA legal arms' website](#), in Georgia, Missouri, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin where politicians received high donations, no permits are necessary to purchase or carry weapons, aside from a permit to carry a handgun.

[In New York state](#), which has a relatively low cumulative total of NRA donations to congressmen (\$40,350), a permit is required to purchase, register, license, and carry handguns. In New York City, that also goes for rifles and shotguns.

In states such as [Massachusetts](#) and [Connecticut](#), whose current congressmen have not received funds from the NRA, the laws surrounding gun ownership are much stricter, according to the NRA-ILA website.

As people of faith, when are we going to fear the Lord more than the NRA? Because that's the only One we're called to fear. To quote Will Willmon again:

"Let the politicians do what they must to be elected by people like us, though I think they are selling us short. My job is not to worry about opinion polls or what nine out of ten Americans can swallow without choking. My peculiar vocation is to help the church think like Christians so that we might be given the grace to act like Jesus."

So what would Jesus do? Well, what did he do in our story? He went someplace no one else wanted to go – the land of the Geresenes, Gentile country – a place no self-respecting rabbi would dare enter. And when he was there he entered the tombs, a God forsaken place according to Jesus' heritage – but he went there anyways to heal and bring salvation.

Friends, are we not called to do the same? Are we not called to bring healing and salvation, even if that takes us someplace that makes us uncomfortable? Even if it brings us some level of discomfort? Should we not also be advocating for God's kingdom – where the fear of the Lord drives us more than the fear of the Other, the unknown, that which we can't control? Where peace is operative, and hospitality is practiced? In the wake of one more violent crime and mass shooting, is it not time to speak up, and be the people God calls us to be?

As someone else once wrote:

Scripture doesn't teach that after we welcome them the stranger will cease being strange to us or that our differences are insignificant. Scripture doesn't teach that by loving our enemies our enemies will cease to be our enemies. Scripture doesn't teach that by visiting the prisoner we'll convince the prisoner to swear off crime. Scripture doesn't teach that in feeding the hungry the hungry will show appreciation to us or that in caring for the needy we won't find the needy a burden to us. Rather, in a world of violence and injustice and poverty and loneliness Jesus has called us to be a people who welcome strangers and love enemies and bring good news to prisoners, feed and clothe the poor and care for those who have no one. We do this because this is the labor Christ has commanded us." (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2016/04/13/will-willimon-and-fear/>)

Friends, is it not time to challenge the present, to change the future to make Christ known? Because I'm getting awfully tired of writing sermons like this, and my guess is you're getting tired of hearing them.

Amen.