

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga  
June 19, 2022  
Year C, 2 Pentecost, Proper 7  
+ Dedication of Ed Johnson Capstone Memorial  
*Faith in the Face of Fear*  
The Rev. Leyla King

1 Kings 19:1-15a  
Psalm 42  
Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 8:26-39

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

“[The people] found the man [...] sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.”

*And they were afraid.*

We may hear that line from Luke’s gospel and wonder about the people’s response to the salvation of the man once possessed by demons. Surely they should have rejoiced. Or wondered. Or just been curious. But fear? *That’s not the right response*, we might think. Or, *that’s not the response I would have had!*

But scratch the surface of that initial reaction to the Gerasenes’ fear and we might be surprised by what we discover about ourselves. In fact, how often is *fear* the go-to human response when what we know of our little corner of the world is transformed? Even when that transformation is *positive*. Even – maybe especially? – when that positive transformation has happened for someone else, someone we don’t identify as “one of us.”

Indeed, as we celebrate Juneteenth today, I wonder if the white response to the emancipation of Black folks in this country has been motivated by the same kind of fear as the Gerasenes showed in first century Palestine.

I imagine the Gerasenes feared what it meant for *them* to have this once-crazed man suddenly free and “in his right mind.” I wonder if they were concerned that he might tell the truth about what it felt like to be shackled by his own community. I wonder if they worried that the story he told might reflect poorly on them, because of their treatment of someone who suffered, of someone they had set outside of their artificially constructed boundaries of belonging, of someone they couldn’t understand – or didn’t want to understand. I imagine those ancient Gerasenes feared all they had to lose when the once-possessed man gained his freedom. Wouldn’t it have been better, they may have thought, to keep things as they were.

And I imagine it’s the same fear that kept Black folks in Texas enslaved right up until June 19, 1865 when Union General Gordon Granger read federal orders that declared all people free. I imagine it’s the same fear that motivated a white mob to kidnap, torture and lynch Ed Johnson, whom we here at Thankful also remember, honor, mourn and celebrate this morning. I imagine it’s the same fear that keeps black and brown and other minority communities in systems of oppression and degradation today.

It’s the fear that the social order as we have constructed it will change. Fear that we who have power will have to give some of it up. Fear that there’s not enough wealth, or jobs, or opportunity to go around. Fear that our assumptions about who is who, who belongs with us and who doesn’t, will be broken. Fear that we will be broken *open* in the process, too, and that it might hurt.

Yes, fear, that go-to human response when we encounter change and transformation – even the positive kind – can have devastating and dangerous impacts. Because fear often turns into one of two things: hate or despair.

And despair is actually the lesser of those two evils. Despair threatens the self only. Take Elijah in the first book of Kings as an example. Elijah is definitely afraid. Rightly, he fears for his life. And that fear quickly turns to despair: “He asked that he might die: ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.’”

The psalmist, too, fears a threat from his enemies and calls out in desperation: “Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me?”

In both cases, human fear-turned-despair is met and silenced by the God who shows up. Every time.

But what about when our fear takes the other tack and turns to hatred, hatred that threatens not our own selves but the lives and well-being of others? Hatred that moves folks to enslave or torture or lynch or shoot others? What do our scriptures say about that? What does our faith tell us about that outcome of our fear? Does God show up even in the face of our human hatred, too?

In Christ Jesus we have the resounding answer: YES. Even our human hatred, impactful though it may at times be, harmful to ourselves and others as it always is, even our human hatred is no match for the overwhelming power of God’s love, made incarnate in Christ Jesus.

As one follower of Jesus put it, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear,” (1 John 4:18). That same love breaks down the boundaries that fear places between us, undoes the distinctions that hatred insists upon. For, as Paul writes in the letter to the Galatians, “in Christ Jesus [we] are all children of God through faith [...] There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.” There is no longer black or white, conservative or progressive, poor or wealthy, gay or straight, cis or trans, or any other distinction you can think of or make up, “for all of [us] are one in Christ Jesus.” All of us “belong to Christ.” All of us are “heirs according to the promise.”

Fear is so often our go-to human response when we encounter transformations in ourselves, in others, in our society. It is so often our natural reaction when we see something we cannot quite understand, when we come across a circumstance or situation – or even another human being – that we cannot control. And it would be so easy to fall into that fear, every time. But that is the coward’s way, not the way of Christ.

No, the way of Christ Jesus is the way of courage – even unto the cross. “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,” we pray in the words Jesus taught us. Lead us away from the temptation of fearing what we do not understand, O Lord. Deliver us from the evil of fear that turns to hatred, anger and despair, O God. Grant us the courage of our faith, that trusting in “the sure foundation of your loving-kindness,” we may learn to love each other ever more deeply and join with you in the creation of your kingdom here on this broken earth. Amen.