

Sermon

Northminster Presbyterian Church: Ordinary 12, Year C (2007)

Reading of the lessons: Galatians 3²³⁻²⁹; Luke 8²⁶⁻³⁹

In the latest Burger King commercial, P. Diddy drives up to Burger King and tells the manager he wants the manager to open up the Burger King because he is hungry. The manager agrees to do so, and then hordes of people show up—it's P. Diddy's 'posse' and they're hungry, too. This summer, the rock band The Police is playing a reunion tour, and thousands of people who never thought they'd be able to see their beloved group play live again are buying tickets like there is no tomorrow. In a couple of weeks, the financial reports will be out for the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates; we'll see who has more contributors, and who has bigger contributors. And, if you are going into withdrawal from the HBO series "The Sopranos" not being on the air, you can always watch "Entourage", about an up-and-coming actor who takes his friends and business associates and advisors and admirers with him as he climbs the food chain of Hollywood.

Posse, groupies, political action committees, entourage. We humans really seem to want to idolize someone—and to be idolized. That hasn't changed much, really, in the past two millennia. In the Roman Empire, politics and economics were driven by what was called the patron-client relationship. A person of wealth and influence rewarded loyalty by giving out money and favors to those in his following. Recipients of this benefaction were expected to sing their patrons praises, to lend political support in the public sphere, and to do whatever labors the patron needed accomplished. The more powerful the patron, the bigger the entourage. The bigger the entourage, the more the patron could influence political and economic decisions to his preference. Michael Vick gives his friends money and access, and they in turn tell the media that Vick really didn't know dogs were fighting at his house. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid

gets his family members jobs as lobbyists working on the very issues Senator Reid will be voting on. Irish musician Bob Geldof tells European politicians his fans will vote them out of office if the politicians don't do certain things. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Jesus has traveled into the land of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. In our Creed this morning, we will confess that Christ descended into hell; this lesson this morning is as close as Jesus will get to hell without actually being there, because he has to cross over the water to get there and first century folk believed the water to be dominated by demons and chaos. Then he steps onto Gentile territory, unclean territory, a territory thought to be unvisited by God, the land of the devils. The Gerasenes don't disappoint, as a man full of demons comes out to meet Jesus. He is really more of an animal—nude, living in the graveyard, screaming at the top of his lungs, breaking chains and bonds whenever he was captured, being driven out into the wilderness. Does Christ have power here? Having crossed over the chaotic seas, having landed in the territory of the godless, having been greeted by the local welcome wagon only to find the hospitality committee is a naked freak telling him to go away, what will Jesus do? What can Jesus do?

Remember when you were a child and you always knew how much trouble you were in by how much of your name your parents used? There was "Todd!", then there was "Todd Hester", and then, moments before nuclear detonation, there was "Christopher Todd Hester". I regret to inform you I heard the full nomenclature quite often. Whenever someone has an obstacle to overcome, the first step is identifying it. Couples who have marriage trouble first have to identify exactly what that trouble is. Parents have to figure out exactly why their little one isn't thriving in school. Every twelve-step process begins with admitting what the addiction is. There is great power in naming something—naming a child or an obstacle or an addiction or

whatnot. There is a sense of gaining authority over something that is named. This is precisely why conservative Jews to this day do not say the name of God—they have no power over God and therefore must not speak his name. Jesus makes the man tell him his name. Even here, where everyone thinks, like Don McLean, that the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost have taken the last train for the coast, even here—Christ has power. We have come to think that God does not have power over certain parts of our lives—our entertainment, our money, our sexuality, our politics—there is a plethora of places we think the reach of Christ’s church falls short. But even in those places where we cannot see Christ; even in those dark moments when we feel ourselves far from grace; even in those relationships that seem untouched by mercy, Christ has power. A Roman legion numbered about six thousand troops. That’s a lot of voices in your head vying for your attention and your loyalty. It’s tough to think of yourself as an individual when six thousand influences are pulling you every which way. Christ has power to make us the women and men we were created to be. No more settling for the carnal behaviors that are beneath us; no more self-righteous pride that is unbecoming of us; no more greeds and prejudices and lusts and malices. Christ knows who we are supposed to be and he is making us that even now.

He demonstrates that power by allowing the demons to inhabit a herd of pigs, leading one Lutheran scholar to comment that this is the first recorded incident of deviled ham. You would think that the crowds would be happy. Finally, this guy is acting in his right mind and, you know, wearing clothes. The whole streaking, screaming, living with the dead thing was getting kind of old. But no, they’re ticked. And I mean ticked enough to ride Jesus out on a rail. Because Jesus’ entourage has grown by one, but not one who can give him any political advantage or public support or even menial labor. Christ’s entourage has grown with the people who can offer him nothing, his posse is expanded with the people unwanted by others, his team

picks first the kid who is always picked last. Maybe the people are mad because they had adjusted to having this guy around. You know, every family has someone in it who is always showing out at Thanksgiving. They drink too much or talk too loud or need money or reopen old wounds or create new ones. We learn over time how to make adjustments and, after a while, we know when the troublemaker is going to make trouble and we know how we are going to respond. But what if, one Thanksgiving, they don't make trouble? What if they are the paragon of virtue and propriety? We know we should be grateful, but if everyone isn't focused on that person's faults, they may begin to focus on our faults. The crowd has learned to focus on the demoniac, and know that his is not the demoniac, might Christ focus on them next? Or, maybe the crowd is upset simply because Christ is just that unpredictable. If Christ is going to pick this guy for his entourage, who else will he pick? What else will he do? Or maybe the crowd is mad because of all the money lost. Maybe they haven't heard that grace isn't a zero-sum game, that there is plenty to go around. Perhaps they haven't yet realized that Christ is a different kind of patron, that his followers are a different kind of client.

Those who are baptized know something Jay-Z's entourage, My Chemical Romance's groupies, just don't know. Christ doesn't choose because of what someone can do for him; he chooses because of what he can do for that someone. And if one person receives Christ's blessing, it is of no detriment to another, for Christ's grace is boundless and indiscriminate. The baptized are the entourage of Christ. It is a belonging that makes us who we are supposed to be, a membership that founded on Christ's gift, and a following that lasts for eternal life. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.