

You are either moving towards Christ or away from Christ. Towards wholeness, and holiness or away from it. Using the words of that other tradition to which I belong, you're either moving towards a drink or away from it. It sounds ominous, but it's true. We humans are dynamic not static and we are either growing, and expanding or we shrink and die.

I had a perfectly lovely afternoon with my grandson earlier this week. Jacob helped me in the garden. He's gotten very good at watering plants at age 2, as long as I have the nozzle set to gentle shower.

The peas are ready to harvest now and Jacob had never seen a fresh pea in its pod before this week. So, when I first suggested we pick peas he had no idea what I was talking about. We sat down on the ground together next to the pea vines and I showed him a pod and opened it up for him. He could see the fat row of peas inside, but still had no idea that this was something good to eat. So, I pulled the peas out and handed him one. "Go ahead, try it." He looked very hesitant. "Go on, it's good. Try it." So, he ate one very gingerly, and of course, as soon as he tasted the sweet crunchiness of a fresh pea he was hooked, like most of us are. He wanted me to open pod after pod for him, and he soon got the hang of hooking his finger under the first pea in the pod and pulling it through to release all the peas. So, I just handed him the pods and let him try to open them up for himself. That was a little more challenging. He ended up biting off the pod to get at the peas. But, hey, it worked.

In ten minutes flat he went from a person who had no idea where peas come from, to being a lover of fresh raw peas. What a wonderful thing to watch in someone: The joy of learning something new; that moment of discovery and understanding, and enjoying the result.

Now, the process of learning can be like it was in this case – lots of fun and smiles. But as we all know, sometimes learning and growing is painful, and disorienting and the benefit difficult to see at first. Two year olds have painful learning experiences too, but they must be learned in order to grow.

Now, I will get to Elijah, but I want to start by talking about our Gospel Story; about the guy from Gerasa, the so called Geresene Demonic. This poor fellow didn't even have a name. When Jesus asks, "What is your name?" it is only the demons within the man that provide the answer, "Legion".

Our story today of this unhappy fellow echoes one of the themes of last week about Jesus turning things upside down and upsetting people. Jesus is still at it. When we are faced with change, we still regard the upheaval as undesirable no matter how dysfunctional things are in the current situation. Learning something new is difficult. Growing is difficult.

So, why can't we just rest in God? Why must we go to all the effort to keep growing? Can't we leave well enough alone? The problem is that it's not well enough.

Take the way the people of Gerasa have been dealing with this man who has lost his name and his mind. His neighbors don't want him living amongst them anymore, so he is chained up among the tombs. He spends his day with dead people. He might as well be dead. I'm sure they bring food and water out to him, but I guess no clothing. That's too much trouble. And when he occasionally breaks his chains, they have to send someone to round him up and secure him again.

What a nightmare for this fellow, and for the townspeople. But this is the way they have come to deal with someone who cannot live safely within the neighborhoods of the city. And after all, out of sight, is out of mind. If they don't see him every day, then they don't have to deal with him. ...or themselves, and their treatment of him. Can you think of situations in which we do this today? In our jails? In our mental care facilities? We have to consider the safety of the town and residents, and the safety of the sick as well. We don't want patients to hurt

themselves or others, and so keeping them locked up for their safety is justified. Safety is important, but what about remembering these people are living, breathing persons.

Jesus arrives in Gerasa and doesn't go to the city officials. He visits the man in the tombs. He appears to be the only one willing to sit down and talk to this fellow as if he is still a human being.

Now here is where it's easy to let our minds get caught up in the part of the story which is not important. The talk about demons and their begging with Jesus to be allowed to go into the swine might seem very quaint to us. We are accustomed to talking about modern medicine and tools for mental health healing that include medication, surgery, and talk therapy or psychoanalysis. Keep in mind that in 2000 years in the future people will look back at **our** way of thinking about these issues and call **us** primitive.

At Jesus' time they thought that mental illnesses were brought about by demon possession. They believed that those demons came from the abyss, and did not want to go back there, which made mental illness so hard to cure. But the belief of the day was that if the demon could be transferred into another body, a pig for example, that the illness could be alleviated.

So, we have a tendency to get sidetracked by this story thinking about what happened to the poor unsuspecting pigs. By the Way, the presence of the pigs shows that Jesus was working and preaching in Gentile areas – to people who keep pigs which, of course, the Jewish people would never do. Referring to our map, the area in which this story took place is one of the towns southeast of the Sea of Galilee. This is in the area of the Decapolis or so called Ten Cities which all were of a Greco-Roman culture founded in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great in the Hellenist period.

But we shouldn't allow the map studies, or the fate of the pigs in this story sidetrack us from the point and the message of the story. It's easy to focus on the pigs and the demons because the image is so compelling; it's quite a picture of the demons entering the swine, and then the

animals rush down the hill to drown in the lake. But let's put that aside and instead let's focus on what's really going on.

This is a story of a man being healed by God through the love and care of Jesus. (BTW, that's what Jesus would like us to learn to do too.) Then, what becomes the central issue is how the people of the town react to the now sane person. Can the people learn....or rather re-learn how to best live together, and build up the community in Christ respecting the dignity of every human being.

And in this case, as in the story last week of the woman with the jar of ointment who was so thankful for the healing forgiveness she received, when Jesus heals people, and things change, it may not be a welcome change to the person's friends and neighbors. It involves doing something differently than the way it has been done in the past. It involves learning something new.

Once the nameless fellow was in his right mind, he wasn't going to be willing to be chained up naked in the tombs anymore. The story tells us that he was restored, was clothed, and was sitting at the feet of Jesus, as a disciple would. In fact he wanted to go with Jesus. Can you blame him? What was there in this town for him? He was always going to be "the crazy guy". Would anyone learn to treat him differently?

The people express this same fear to Jesus when they ask him to leave. They were saying in effect, "This fellow has always been crazy and that's that. "Don't turn our lives upside down! Don't heal people, and make us change the way we treat them. We know how things have been, and we like it that way."

The restored man had learning to do of his own. Jesus told him to stay in his community to be an example for all of them...to be Christ's presence and a reminder that things can get better. Everyone involved had to be willing to do things differently.

So, the townspeople had a choice. They could choose the way of faith and growth which is risky, and invite this man back into the community. Or they could choose the way of fear, which seems easier, comfortable, familiar. Which would you choose?

Now, if Paul had written his letter to the Gerasenes instead of the Galatians, he might have changed his language slightly. If you are in Christ there is no Jew or Greek or Roman, there is no male or female, there is no sane or insane. We are all one in Christ Jesus. Paul took Jesus teachings and put them in concrete current terms for the people he addressed.

Now, on to Elijah. Elijah has had about enough of being a prophet, and is dead tired of all this learning and growing stuff. He had been doing what God wanted him to do – to confront the King of Israel and make the people see that they needed to move towards God. He felt that he succeeded only in making a mortal enemy of the very dangerous Jezebel. He decided to high tail it south to Beer-Sheba shown on your map all the way down in the Southern kingdom of Judah. He went as far as he could and collapsed, hungry, tired and ready to just give up on life altogether. There was no reward for his hard work. He was now going to be on the run for the rest of his life, he figured. But God provided food for him and a place to rest and he built up his strength again. He was sent to the place where God has always been very present – Mount Horeb. This was the place where God could teach something to Elijah, and Elijah could become ready to learn.

God was not in the wild weather, the earthquake and the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence. Elijah learned that God does not speak through the weather and natural phenomenon, but in quiet times of prayer and reflection. So, God challenges Elijah to think about what he has learned in his time in the Northern Kingdom and then get back to work. Then he is given a commission.

So, what Elijah came to understand, and please God, may we learn this too, is that in time apart when we can rest, reflect, and pray, God will heal us and give us the tools turn to face

the direction of the Holy once again, and get back to work. It's all about being willing to be open to God's Word, to learn something new and to take on a new challenge whether we are 2 years old, 52 or 82.

The rest we need is here. The sacrament we will receive will feed us, and refresh us and give us the right perspective again to continue our walk towards Christ rather than away.

“Send out your light and your truth that they may lead us and bring us to the holy hill and to your dwelling.” Psalm 43