

June 19, 2022
Hope Lutheran Church
Rev. Mary Erickson
Luke 8:26-39; Galatians 3:23-29

To See Beneath the Exterior Shell

Friends, may grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

“Ubuntu” is a Zulu word with deep meaning in southern Africa. It’s one of those words that doesn’t translate well into another language. Ubuntu refers to the connective spirit of human community. One possible translation is “I am because we are.”

The word rose in significance at the end of the Apartheid era in South Africa. This concept of Ubuntu was lifted up as a way to help the nation heal after its long and painful history of racial division.

Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected president post-Apartheid, described Ubuntu in this way: it’s “the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others.”

Ubuntu is the awareness that we’re all connected. We recognize the humanity of each other; we manifest the qualities of compassion and empathy with one another.

Our two readings today, first from Galatians and then from Luke, they both reveal Ubuntu in Christ Jesus. Jesus creates our Ubuntu in one another.

In our gospel reading we encounter one of the most heart-wrenching displays of human misery. Jesus and his disciples have just sailed to the eastern side of Lake Galilee. This is the region of the Decapolis. It’s deeply Gentile territory.

They’ve landed on foreign shores. As the boat grounds on the beach, Jesus and his disciples are met by a demon-possessed man. The description of him seems like he’s suffering from a profound form of mental illness. His own people have resorted to binding him in chains to control him. However, in his episodes of madness, he breaks free of the chains. He’s run away from humanity. He lives completely cut off from any sense of Ubuntu.

The man has fled into the wilderness. He dwells among the tombs. He lives with the dead. Picture him: he’s filthy, his hair is matted, he’s undernourished and frail. He’s barefoot and naked.

Everyone in his community knows exactly who this man is. The swineherds know him, too. And they’re all afraid of him. And maybe he’s even afraid of himself. He lives cut off from humanity. Only the dead are his friends. Such a pathetic, broken figure!

This man runs up to Jesus and begins screaming at him. Jesus asks the man what his name is. He replies, “Legion.” A legion was a unit of 6000 Roman soldiers. The name implies that the poor man is overwhelmed by a legion of demons.

Legion. That’s not his real name. The man’s own sense of identity has been eclipsed by his demons. He’s lost his own identity.

But Jesus knows his identity. Jesus sees through the dirt and the filth, he sees beyond the agonized shouting and madness. Jesus

sees him, the man, the SOUL. He sees him for who he really is, beyond all his torment and isolation and loss of human dignity. Jesus – sees – him.

This man is not lost. He's been found. This man is not beyond salvation. His savior has come across the lake, into deeply foreign territory, into the grave yard to find him and heal him. Jesus is here to return this poor, tragic soul to human community, to ubuntu.

Jesus casts out all that is tormenting this man. He drives it out. The powerful chaos of negative energy leaves the man and enters a nearby herd of pigs. The pigs are riled up and they stampede over the cliff and into the sea.

The swineherds are astonished and terrified by what they've seen. They high tail it into town to tell people what's happened. Now the whole town comes out to see this terrible thing. And there they find the man they've long feared. But now he's fully clothed. The demons have left him. He's sane, he's sitting beside Jesus.

They find this more terrifying than when the man was out of his mind. WHO IS THIS, who is more powerful than this man's demons? Who has command over the force of evil? They ask Jesus to leave.

He does leave, but the man he healed, the one who was so helplessly cut off from humanity. He's restored into Ubuntu. He returns to his HOME. He returns to the community of his people.

Jesus saw beneath the outward manifestation of this tortured man's exterior. He saw beyond it, he saw the human soul that he truly was. St. Paul encourages us to do the same with one another.

It's very easy for us to pigeonhole one another – and ourselves – into categories. Like the demon-possessed man, we can lose our identity because we think of ourselves in terms of the legion categories we dwell in. These multiple categories inflate in prominence; they eclipse our own internal sense of self. And we start to define ourselves in terms of them. No longer am I Mary Louise, who was baptized many years ago in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I think of myself more in terms of the legion ways I've been externally identified: Female, Caucasian, 62 years old, heterosexual, middle class, college educated, American, pastor, wife. The list can go on.

All of these things are part of the mosaic of characteristics that have coalesced around me. Some of them I have shaped and chosen, but many others are beyond my control. It's simply who and where I was born. Some of these "givens" have afforded me with privilege and safety: I'm white, I'm middle class, I'm a citizen of the United States. But other factors work against my place in the world: my gender, my increasing age.

How am I seen in the world? How are you seen? How do we see one another? These are matters of Ubuntu.

This is what Paul was getting at when he wrote to the Galatians. As a community, their sense of Ubuntu was being split apart. They viewed one another in terms of their exterior shells. Who was born a Gentile, who was born a Jew? Who was a slave, who was free? Who was male, who was female?

These were their Legion. These were the ways they had come to identify themselves and one another. Paul tells them this is not

their true identity. Your identity, Paul says, was forged at your baptism. On that day you put on Christ. You were clothed in Christ.

Jesus Christ has looked beyond all of your external qualifiers. He has looked within and he's recognized YOU, he acknowledges and claims you in all your humanity, your God given dignity. He has claimed your soul. You are his.

Just like the once demon possessed man sat beside Jesus fully clothed, so have we in our baptism. On that day we were clothed in Christ.

So, brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, let us see beneath the external shells of each other. As we have each been clothed in Christ, let us also see one another with the eyes of Christ. And in that recognition, Jesus will restore us into his Ubuntu.