

**Sermon for Proper 7C – June 23, 2019**  
**Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio**  
**The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes**

***Come Out for Christ!***

Have you heard me I say aloud how blessed I feel to share ministry with the Staff and Volunteers who are the “hands and heart of Christ” greeting each and every child, adult, pet, who cross the threshold to the office? Each and every day, as you know, this campus is blessed by the presence of those who call this campus, “home”, those who feel the beauty of creation and the very presence of the Divine and sit on our benches, others who walk the labyrinth as they reflect on whatever is on their hearts, those who find a sense of peace here that they, perhaps, cannot find any other place, and this week, we are especially blessed with the presence of teachers, students, and volunteers as they welcome the children of our Serna/Barrington Neighborhood Summer Enrichment to make a safe, holy, and joyful community of learning and friendship. Well, if you have not heard me say how blessed I feel, hear it clearly now. I am blessed! The blessings that emanate into the world from this one little corner of God’s creation on the corner of Barrington and Starcrest are nothing short of miraculous and so is the great diversity of God’s beloved who share this sacred place with us.

A funny story... Bill was away just for a few days (most other times, I think he has a cot stashed somewhere here) and so on Wednesday I went into his office to say hello. After a lovely greeting, Bill stood up and said, “I saw the email you sent me with the subject line, ‘termination’ and I thought, oh, my she’s had enough already!” The truth of the matter is that I love, love, love being here, being among you, and especially visiting those whose generosity and faithfulness over 50 years have provided a legacy, now a spiritual home for you and me and so many others. I invite you to consider your place in the long line of the communion of saints of this parish. The truth of the matter is that regardless of how long or how short a time you have considered yourself a Reconciler, you stand in the midst of the very stream of saints that labored in love to assure that you and I would find home here. And, so, it is our turn to take up the labor of love as stewards of the blessings and privileged bearers of the legacy of Church of Reconciliation in this “blessed present” and “glorious future” that God dreams for us.

Today’s lessons are powerful ones. The Gospel challenges us, if we dare approach it with vulnerability and openheartedness, with a tomb-dweller. A man who only dwelled

in the places of the dead. He lives on the very darkest, most dismal, most dire margins of the living. In fact, there is something inside me that believes that in his present state, he would prefer to be dead. As of this moment, no one remembers his name; those who encounter him barely consider him a human being. He was the accursed one, the one “out of his mind”, the one possessed by demons. He wanders the tombs, naked, neglected, ashamed, and terrified. This human being is reduced to the ranks of the unlovable, the untouchable, the unknowable, the unworthy throwaway.

Even when asked his name, he responds, “Legion” as the layer upon layer of neglect, judgment, persecution and pain have weighed him down that he no longer has a name worth remembering, let alone worth sharing. This man knows that he is both feared and a freak. He knows his place and the people of the town are happy to remind him where he belongs.

Let’s be honest, the people of the town, perhaps more like us than we wish to admit, are relieved to have him dwelling in the shadows of the tombs, at a safe distance. At least they are in control of their own pain, fears, and judgments, or so they think. They are the “pretty ones”, the “worthy ones”, the ones, whose “shadows” really never see the light of day. God help us, they think, at least we are not like *that* one.

Then Jesus shows up in the very place of the shadow of death, among the tombs, where only the dead deserve to be. And in that moment of showing up, everything changes. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” I hear him shrieking out, releasing the primal pain he has born, and saying, “Leave me for the dead man that I am. For I am no longer worthy to be among the living.”

Isn’t it amazing that even the “demons” recognize the power of God in Jesus Christ to release the prisoner, the tomb dweller, the lost, from the grip of death! The undeniable message of this Gospel, of this encounter with Jesus is that no one, **NO ONE**, dwelling in the shadow of death, assailed by pain of one sort or another or judgment of one sort or another, who has succumbed to the power of death is beyond redemption. Not Legion, not me, not you!

So how do the townsfolk respond? Not surprisingly, they invite Jesus to be on his way, to get out of town, to leave their ticky tacky boxes of who’s worthy and who is not, intact. Not so different from me, or perhaps from you. Who among us wants to shake

up our well-controlled (or so we think), neatly defined lives, and hard-fought beliefs only to have them thrown on their head? No. There is no middle ground here. And usually, when you and I are caught in a struggle about carefully constructed values, views, beliefs, and stereotypes, we wish to be left alone to our own devices. *“Do not come too close, Jesus!”* becomes our prayer. Conversion to the Way of Love, the Way of Jesus, makes its demands upon us, most especially in holding loosely to well-honed beliefs and yes, prejudices.

It’s not difficult to understand why this man, now set free, desires to leave the tombs and literally follow Jesus. To go with him, travel in his company, and worship him in gratitude for the healing he has received. I sure would want to stay with Jesus.

Yet Jesus instructs him to remain, saying, *“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”* And Luke tells us that the man does exactly as he is told. He returns to the very people who rejected him, who despised him, who made him an outcast, and set him apart in the tombs. And the one who was once the living dead becomes the witness to new life, healing, and salvation in Jesus Christ.

In all honestly, perhaps there has been a time in your life that in some way resembles this tomb dweller. When you and I have been held hostage by limits placed upon us, or identities that have been assigned to us that somehow limit or even place upon us a feeling of unworthiness and judgment that drive us to despair. This story is meant as a beacon of hope for each and every one of us because Jesus is always showing up in the places of death and dying, in the shadows, in the long- hidden corners of deep woundedness, in such festering places of pain. Just as for this man, Jesus liberates us. He sets us free from the many disrespectful, demeaning, demoralizing identities we have been assigned or have claimed as our own.

Jesus comes close to the tomb dweller and sets him free. God never intended for him nor for any of us to dwell in the shadow of death or to assume an identity anything other than as a beloved child of God worthy of healing, health, restoration, reconciliation, and freedom in Christ.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians echoes this same message. No one stands outside of the love of God in Christ Jesus. There are simply no outsiders. There is no one ever to be considered unworthy, unwelcome, or unlovable. *No one*. This text from the third chapter of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a radical text (radical as in rooted, as the

radish, anchored in the all-inclusive love of Jesus Christ.) Imagine in the context of Paul's writing how radical it must have been to hear that the basic distinctions of race, class and gender must break down. Human-constructed divisions between "haves and have nots" between "insiders and outsiders" between the "right and the left" between ... well, I invite you to add your own well-worn categories of division. *Not one of these belongs in the Body of Christ and in the lives of those who profess Jesus the Christ as Savior.*

***There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female for all of you are one in Jesus Christ.***

Oh, my friends, how we humans still have so much work to do! This weekend marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Riots when excluded, despised people whose very lives were judged (and still are being judged) as illicit, immoral, and sinful stood up to such oppression and claimed their status as beloved, worthy, human beings who never belonged living among the tombs.

Paul declares that Christ alone matters; Christ our unity, Christ our focus, Christ the beginning and the end...

Fellow Reconcilers, this month of June, commonly referred to as "Pride" month is only one expression of the privilege and freedom it is to live with the dignity of our life as children made in the image and likeness of God. In the great diversity of our Creator, no one stands outside. Not one of us ever need inhabit the place of the tombs. Indeed, our baptismal vocation is to go to the place of the tombs and offer love.

I invite you, whoever you are, and however your identity to "***come out for Christ...*** to live the Way of Love, and to witness to the beautiful diversity that breaks down all barriers and welcomes all the creatures and creation of God to rejoice in our belovedness.

Today, thanks to Rusty, we have these rainbow-colored cranes in baskets in each narthex. I ask you to take two, one to keep, and one to give away. A message of joy, inclusion, and love intended by God for all God's beloved.

***Amen.***