A young, successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street, going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar when a brick smashed into his side door. The man slammed on the brakes and backed the car to the spot where the brick had been thrown. He jumped out of the car, grabbed the nearest kid and pushed him against his car, shouting, “This is a brand new car and that brick you threw is going to cost a lot of money. Why did you do it?” The yound boy apologized, “Please, mister. I'm sorry but I didn't know what else to do. I threw the brick because no one else would stop.” With tears dripping down his face and off his chin, the child pointed to a spot just around a parked car. “It's my brother. He rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can't lift him up. He's too heavy for me.” The young boy asked the man, “Will you please help me get him back up and into his wheelchair?” The man was moved beyond words. He lifted the fallen boy into his wheelchair, then took out a fresh handkerchief and dabbed at the boy's cuts and scrapes. A quick look told him everything was going to be alright. “Thank you and may God bless you,” the grateful younger brother told the stranger. The man watched as the boy pushed his brother down the sidewalk. He walked back to his car and saw that the damage was very noticeable, but he never had it repaired. The man kept the dent there to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone would have to throw a brick at him to get his attention.

Sometimes God has to throw a brick at us in order to get our attention. That certainly turned out to be the case as Jesus made his way through Galilee with his disciples. Jesus gave the men enough clues to know who he was and what he wanted them to do. As they walked and talked, Jesus shared the truth of God's love through parables. In the towns they visited, Jesus healed sick people right in front of them. He forgave sinners their worst transgressions. Jesus got in a boat with his disciples and woke from a nap to calm the raging waters that threatened to sink their vessel. The disciples turned out to be slow learners. Time after time, Jesus tried to get their attention while the men puzzled over his cryptic stories and argued about which of them Jesus loved the most. One gets the sense that Luke includes this story about the man possessed by demons as a sort of “brick story,” to show how hard it was for the disciples to get their minds off themselves and onto Jesus and his power to overcome the worst evils in this world.

The disciples should have been onto Jesus this time. First, they followed Jesus as he left the comfortable, predominantly Jewish area of Galiee and crossed the sea to the land of the Gerasenes. This was Gentile territory, not a place a Jewish rabbi would normally venture. Once on land, Jesus was encountered – many would say “accosted” – by a man possessed by an unclean spirit. That’s an interesting designation, reminding us that there are a variety of spirits, some life giving, some not. This one was not. And, in Jewish custom, the possessed man was therefore not only perilous to himself and others, but religiously unclean. In addition to that, the young man could no longer stay among the living in the local town but rather dwelled among the dead in the tombs outside of town. Tombs, we should note, are another place considered ritually unclean. All of which means that Jesus, the Jewish itinerant rabbi proclaiming the coming kingdom of God, went to an unclean land to meet a man possessed by an unclean spirit living in an unclean place. This was, according to Jewish traditon, the very last place Jesus should have been. The man Jesus and his disciples went to see had been possessed by demons for a very long time and no one had come up with a way to free him. In fact, many didn't even care if he was healed at all. But Jesus cared. He cared enough to get in a boat and go across the Sea of Galilee to find a man he had never met, to search that man out in what essentially was a cemetery on the outskirts of town. Jesus cared enough about the young man that he healed him of the demons that had taken over his body and spirit.

It was certainly a “brick” moment for the people of the town and Jesus' disciples; it was a chance to see how far Jesus' love reached, a time for their faith to be reignited, an opportunity to understand who this Jesus was and why he was among them, an invitation to stop what they were doing and follow the example of the compassionate healer. But the people of the town were afraid of what they had seen; they were afraid of the power of unleashed love. And the disciples did not seem to recognize the power in their midst, as they left with their leader and resumed their travel around Galilee. This story and many others in the Bible tell us that Jesus always shows up when people need him the most. Jesus did not cause the man across the waters to be possessed by demons but he was willing to seek the man out because the man needed healing. That's what Jesus does. He shows up in places and situations where pain is the greatest to heal people.

This week, Jesus is in Orlando. He is with the families of those who were slaughtered in a senseless act of violence. Jesus is with the dead as he welcomes them into his embrace. Jesus is with those who feel singled out for hate because of their sexual orientation; Jesus is there because he loves them and accepts them for who they are. Jesus is with the parents of the child who died in the alligator attack this week. No matter how many people hold them responsible for their son's death, Jesus is with those shattered parents, comforting them in their sorrow. As I write this, events are going on in Charleston, South Carolina, to remember the dead who were murdered in the place where they had gathered to deepen their faith. Jesus is there.

God always shows us in our moments of profound doubt, grief, loss, and defeat. No one on this planet is outside the embrace of God, for God loves everyone God has made.

God loves all: male and female; young and old; gay or straight; white, black, Asian, Latino; believers and non-believers; Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, atheist; the list goes on.

Luke tells us that Jesus was willing to go to a place he wasn't welcome to show his inclusive love. Where are we willing to go? Whom are we willing to love? In the wake of one more violent crime of hate and terror, we are reminded that God is always among those in greatest pain and need. We also must remember that we are sent to go and do likewise. This week, that means God is particularly present in Orlando, and so we are called to be also, whether physically present, via vigil other means of support, or in our own corporate and personal prayer or by contributing to the funds set up to care for the families of the dead. This is not often easy work, of course, but we take it up and go out knowing that God is with us, working through us to seek out those in need, to share a word of mercy and grace, and to witness to the hope we have in Jesus. For Jesus continues to seek us out when we feel down and out, caught in the shadow lands, eager for a new name, identity and future. If it takes a brick to our heads and hearts to remember that, Jesus is not above throwing one.

Let me conclude with a "Prayer for Neighbor-Love" from Prayers for Worship Leaders, a prayer that I think is appropiate today.

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O Lord God, we praise your name for all the rich variety that is found in the human family, your children. Thank you for the different songs by which we sing our joys and sorrows to one another, for the different languages in which we speak our hopes and hungers, for the contrasts of color and stature and gender which catch our eye and make us want to know each other. Glory be to you for the many faces and voices of our family! Now teach us to treasure our differences, great God as evidence of the endless richness of your love for this world. We pray in the name of our Lord, the Jew who praised a Samaritan; who interceded for an adulteress; who ministered alike to Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women, and was not afraid of the wealth of your love. AMEN.

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*Pentecost 5C**June 19, 2016**Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish**Luke 8: 26-39* |