

Yr. C, Proper 7
June 23, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1400 Words

Lessons: Isaiah 65:1-9
Psalm 22:18-27
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

What must the *neighbors* have thought?

I'm not talking about the Gerasenes. We know what *they thought* of the naked, demon-possessed man shackled and chained among the tombs. I'm talking about the old neighbors of Mr. John Howard Elliott. His daughter, Rebecca, was about to marry a Republican.

That's not all. You see, Rebecca's fiancé was also a decorated military officer. Now, normally, this would be a good thing—except that Rebecca was born in Alabama, and her soon-to-be-husband, John Foster, was a general in the Union Army.¹

It is tempting to think that *our 2019 divisions*—ideologically, politically, religiously, or geographically—are more troubling than they used to be. And they *are*, for us. There is a marked decline in our national and global temperament during the past couple of decades.

Yet, historically speaking, it could be worse. It *has been worse*. And yet, neither of those realities are excuses to tolerate where we are now. Rather, the fact that things *could be worse* and *have been worse* should sound like alarms for us to do better...and *be better*...than that.

Cities and towns, states and nations all over the world depend upon courageous souls who are willing to listen for—and respond to—the better angels of our nature.

“*Before faith came,*” wrote St. Paul, “we were imprisoned and guarded under the law,” St. Paul was challenging a congregation that was divided...a congregation being *misled* by people who wanted to *further divide* the community. Paul was completely intolerant of the leaders trying to divide the people of Galatia. He pointed instead to the *merciful power* of Jesus Christ to make all things—and all *people*—new.

Rebecca Foster and her husband had four children. He became a prominent lawyer and politician in New York, after serving as a cabinet secretary for President Abraham Lincoln. They became members of the dynamic congregation of Calvary (Episcopal) Church on Park Avenue.

Sadly, twenty three years later their marriage fell apart. John Foster succumbed to the disease of alcoholism and abandoned his wife and children two years before he died.

Rebecca did two things. From the day he left, she wore black clothes in public to denote her mourning. And, second, she took a paying job as a city missionary to the local prison in order to support herself and her children.²

When Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes (which is opposite Galilee) *they* were crossing boundaries—religiously, politically, and ideologically as well as geographically. Let me state the obvious—Jesus did not lead his disciples there by accident. Jesus is always pushing his disciples to become *more courageous souls*—listening for and responding to—our better angels.

¹ Wikipedia article—Rebecca Salome Foster, June 18, 2019.

² New York Times, February 23, 1902, p. 2 as referenced in the Wikipedia article—Rebecca Salome Foster, June 18, 2019.

And, unfortunately, our better angels are often discovered in the most difficult and demanding circumstances...like a dirty collection of tombs, haunted by a gentile, possessed with demons and surrounded by nasty pigs.

What would *you* have thought as a disciple of Jesus, called to such a filthy, frightening place? Would you have been afraid? Disgusted? Maybe doubting the judgment of Jesus?

The dark, frightening, overcrowded prison in lower Manhattan was nicknamed “The Tombs.” Charles Dickens described it this way: “Such indecent and disgusting dungeons as these cells would bring disgrace upon the most despotic empire in the world!”³

Well, in the mid-1880’s Rebecca Foster became known as a “Tombs Angel.” She visited those prisoners faithfully, week after week, for twelve years.⁴ Rebecca believed in people in whom nobody else would believe. She helped liberate the falsely accused, and she showed compassion toward all the incarcerated.

It was a *long distance* between the pristine pews at Calvary Church on Park Avenue and the dark world of “the Tombs” into which Rebecca descended every day. There was quite a division between wealthy financiers, future presidents and first ladies, bishops and scholars; and the discarded, forgotten, not-yet-convicted poor who were waiting and praying for a fair trial.⁵

Unfortunately, our better angels are often discovered in the most difficult and demanding places. Rebecca’s angelic, Christ-like Spirit was discovered immediately by those prisoners, shackled in “the Tombs.”

What would *you* have thought as a disciple of Jesus, called to such a filthy, frightening place? Would you have been afraid? Disgusted? Maybe doubting the judgment of Jesus?

Near the end of the Gospel story, after the dramatic exorcism and the drowning pigs, the ‘regular people’ from town start showing up. By now, the prisoner has been freed, clothed, healed, and restored to life.

“Praise God!” Right?

Sadly, the ‘normal people’ are the ones who can’t handle it. “Not in our backyard!” they say. You see, they really *liked* the clear division between ‘us and him’...between ‘us and them.’ And so they ask Jesus to leave them alone. Unfortunately, our better angels can also remain undiscovered in the most difficult and demanding places.

If we value our place *above* other people more than our community *with* other people; then we will not like what Jesus is doing...because Jesus is always crossing boundaries—religiously, politically, ideologically and geographically. Jesus—the Son of the God and Father of *all*—is always forgiving, healing, restoring, and transforming people wherever he is, and that grace inevitably upsets the established order and division of things...*and people*.

St. Paul plainly said this to those who promoted the *old* order and divisions—“in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female; for *all of you* are one in Christ Jesus.”

³ Peter Libbey, *New York’s Tribute to the ‘Tombs Angel’* in the New York Times, June 16, 2019.

⁴ The number of years of her service was reported in the Los Angeles Herald, Vol. XXIX, Number 147, on February 25, 1902.

⁵ The notable types of people in the congregation is noted in a Wikipedia article—‘Calvary Church’—and substantiated by various sources.

The finishing touch for the newest disciple of Jesus Christ in today's Gospel story was when Jesus sends him into town as a messenger for those Gerasene city folk. Jesus said, "Go tell your *new neighbors* how much God has done for you."

With that commissioning, the miracle of Jesus was complete. You see, in their ancient Greek language a messenger was called an 'angel.'⁶ So, Jesus literally transformed the Gerasene demoniac into the Gerasene angel!

The story of Rebecca Foster—the 'Tombs Angel'—ended tragically. She was one of at least 14 people who died in the Park Avenue Hotel fire of 1902. Newspapers as far away as Los Angeles reported the sad news of the death of the 'Tombs Angel.'

"In the woman's prison (a memorial) service was held. Hardened women...cried like children. All the co-workers with Mrs. Foster spoke of her self-sacrifice and the place she had filled in the hearts of hundreds whom she (personally) rescued and sent away to lead better lives. In the men's prison there was (also) a service. Some of the men wept when her name was mentioned."⁷

What must her old neighbors have thought? We know the answer! Most of us can recognize a better angel when we see one.

The good news is that disgraceful prison in lower Manhattan was shut down and replaced the year Rebecca died. Judges in New York also joined with others—including President Theodore Roosevelt—to honor the 'Tombs Angel.'⁸

A beautiful, marble, bas-relief memorial was installed in a criminal court building, but in 1940 it was moved into a basement storage when that building was demolished. Forgotten for decades, the sculpture was re-installed this week in the New York Supreme Court building, and it will be re-dedicated on Tuesday.⁹

In the midst of our contemporary divisions, in the middle of difficult and demanding circumstances, I urge you to listen for—and respond to—our better angels. Consider what kinds of courageous words and deeds you might share for the glory of God and for the benefit of other people—Jews *and* gentiles, shackled *and* free, poor *and* rich, women *and* men. You get the idea—because the Bible teaches us that in Christ, we are all the same!

So, follow where Jesus leads, across boundaries of all sorts. Don't be afraid of your doubts, like the Gerasenes were. Rather, become the angel—the *messenger*—to others who are stuck in their doubts and fears, tombs and prisons of all sorts.

Heal, forgive, and restore as you are able, for this world needs more courageous souls who are willing to do these things in difficult and demanding circumstances.

In thought, word, deed, and gift; generously and boldly declare how much Christ has done for *you!*

What will our neighbors think? You know the answer. Most people can recognize a better angel when they see one.

Amen.

⁶ More precisely, *angelos*.

⁷ Los Angeles Herald, Vol. XXIX, Number 147, on February 25, 1902.

⁸ Peter Libbey, *New York's Tribute to the 'Tombs Angel'* in the New York Times, June 16, 2019.

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