

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Galatians 3:23-29, Psalm 43, Luke 8:26-39
June 19, 2016
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It all started early Tuesday morning, February 21, when Louise Degrafinried's husband, Nathan, got up from bed in Mason, Tennessee, to let out the cat. "Cat," as they called him, stood at the edge of the porch, his hair bristled up on his arched back, and he hissed.

"What you see out there, Cat?" Nathan asked.

A big man stepped from around the corner of the house and pointed a shotgun at Nathan.

"Lord, Honey," Louise heard her husband shout. "Open the door, he's got a gun."

Before she could open the door, the man with the gun had shoved Nathan inside, pushing him and Louise against the wall.

"Don't make me kill you!" he shouted, thrusting the gun in their faces. The couple knew immediately that the intruder was one of the escaped inmates whom they had heard about on the radio. He was Riley Arzeneaux of Memphis, who, with four other inmates, had escaped from Fort Pillow State Prison the previous Saturday.

Louise Degrafinried, a 73-year-old grandmother, stood her ground. "Young man," she said, "I am a Christian lady. I don't believe in no violence. Put that gun down and you sit down. I don't allow no violence here."

The man relaxed his grip on the shotgun. He looked at her for a moment. Then he laid his gun down on the couch.

"Lady," he said quietly, "I'm so hungry. I haven't had nothing to eat for three days."

"Young man, you just sit down there and I'll fix you breakfast. Nathan," she said, "go get this young man some dry socks."

With that Louise went to work. She fixed him eggs, bacon, white bread toast, milk and coffee. Then she got out her best napkins, and set her kitchen table.

"When we sat down, I took that young man by the hand and said, 'Young man, let's give thanks that you came here and that you are safe.' I said a prayer then asked him if he would like to say something to the Lord. He didn't say anything, so I said, 'Just say, "Jesus wept."' Then we all ate breakfast.

("Why did you tell him to say, 'Jesus wept'?" I asked her later. "Because," she said, "I figured that he didn't have no church background, so I wanted to start him off simple; something short, you know.")

"After breakfast, we sat there and I began to pray. I held his hand and kept patting him on the leg. He trembled all over. I said, 'Young man, I love you and God loves you. God loves us all, every one of us, especially you. Jesus died for you because he loves you so much.'

"You sound just like my grandmother,' he said. 'She's dead.' Nathan said that he saw one tear fall down the boy's cheek.

"About that time, we heard police cars coming down the road. 'They gonna kill me when they get here,' he said.

"No, young man, they aren't going to hurt you. You done wrong but God loves you.' Then me and Nathan took him by the arms, helped him up, and took him out of the kitchen toward the door. 'You let me do all the talking,' I told him. The police got out of their cars. They had their guns out. 'Y'all put those guns away. I don't allow no violence here. Put them away. This young man wants to go back. Nathan,' I said, 'you bring the young man on out to the car.' Then they put the handcuffs on him and took him back to the prison."

Was Mrs. Degrafinried frightened? "No," she said. "Nathan said he was scared, but not me. I knew God was with me, that God had sent that young man to me for a reason. I knew God would lead me in the right direction."

This true story, told several years ago in *The Christian Century* magazine, ended by noting that Nathan and Louise Degrafinried were lifelong members of Mount Sinai Primitive Baptist Church.

We can draw all sorts of important lessons from it – and I have used it before in a different circumstance – but it seems especially pertinent to today's gospel because in Luke, Jesus has a calm and faithful response in the face of a potentially terrifying encounter.

Luke tells us that the man Jesus meets in the country of Gerasenes is loaded with evil demons. He cannot keep clothes on. He's been banished to a graveyard far from the city after being kept under guard unsuccessfully. Even chains and shackles cannot secure him.

He is obviously a dangerous man who falls down before Jesus and shouts at the top of his voice. Anyone but Jesus would be racing back to the boat or picking up stones to hinder his advance.

Instead, Jesus disarms the crazy man by speaking to his demons. God's power confronts the enemy straight on. Louise Degrafinried also confronted a potential enemy with God's power of love. In both cases, evil was no match for love.

We don't know what happened to Riley Arzeneaux, the escaped prisoner, but we can imagine he had a life-altering experience at the home of Louise and Nathan that day. We do know what happens to the Gerasene demoniac, as he is sometimes called. Now in his right mind, he wants to accompany the one who saved him from a life of total isolation and utter madness. Jesus refuses his request and instead sends him back to his home to tell of God's mighty deeds. This former wild man becomes the first Gentile evangelist.

So what are we to make of Mrs. Degrafinried and Jesus? Will we be like the people in today's story from Luke who want Jesus to leave because his love for a known lunatic altered their former way of life? Will we say, "That's fine for a 73-year-old grandmother in backwater Tennessee to live a life of actual nonviolence, but the world is far more dangerous in our communities in 2016?"

Last Monday, the day after the terrible shooting occurred in Orlando, one of our members sent me this quote from Aeschylus, an ancient Greek playwright, who said, "Especially in times of darkness, that is the time to love, that an act of love may tip the balance."

You and I can tip the balance toward a more sane and healed world where, as St. Paul says, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female," when we choose God's love first and always. AMEN.