



From the Pulpit: June 12, 2022

Trinity Sunday—New Member Sunday

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Luke 8:26–39

When Silvi and I took the IMPACT mission trip to Nassau, Bahamas in 2014, we worked with the All Saints Camp, a refuge for men, women, and children diagnosed with HIV or AIDS. The camp is located on a high ridge, with small houses lining the top of the ridge and mango trees in every backyard.

That reality makes the place seem almost romantic, and there was enough joy in that place to welcome visitors and celebrate life's milestones, but it was still a place of hardship, lacking resources, and marked by stigma. We were there laying bricks for an on site hurricane shelter, since, as you can imagine, the ridge would be quite exposed in the event of a hurricane, but also because, despite local hurricane shelters nearby, emergency personnel were in the habit of refusing to transport the residents of All Saints Camp because of the lasting stigma around HIV/AIDS.

While we were there, I was walking with one of the nurses, and she pointed down the ridge to a cemetery below. It had seen better days. Stones were askew. The paths were littered. "There" she said, "he used to live there." She was talking about one of the residents. For years he lived in the cemetery, no where else for him to go. Kicked out of the house. Rejected by family. Living with HIV/AIDS. Unable to secure housing. In and out of jail. Always returning to the cemetery. She said it took much convincing and they had to secure appropriate funding, but finally the staff got him to move up the ridge and live at All Saints Camp. I picture this

man when I hear today's scripture passage. I met this man, and maybe you have too, in your own way, the one who lived among the tombs, metaphorical or note, who everyone had abandoned.

Hear now our passage from the gospel of Luke.

Jesus and his disciples sailed to the Gerasenes' land, which is across the lake from Galilee. As soon as

"He was formed by the cold northern Atlantic, the rugged mountains, the bogs, heaths, and grasslands."

Jesus got out of the boat, a certain man met him. The man was from the city and was possessed by demons. For a long time, he had lived among the tombs, naked and homeless. When he saw Jesus, he shrieked and fell down before him. Then he shouted, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" He said this because Jesus had already

commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had taken possession of him, so he would be bound with leg irons and chains and placed under guard. But he would break his restraints, and the demon would force him into the wilderness.

Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"Legion," he replied, because many demons had entered him. They pleaded with him not to order them to go back into the abyss. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs. Jesus gave them permission, and the demons left the man and entered the pigs. The herd rushed down the cliff into the lake and drowned.

When those who tended the pigs saw what happened, they ran away and told the story in the city and in the countryside. People came to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone. He was sitting at Jesus' feet, fully dressed and completely sane. They were filled with awe. Those people who had actually seen what had happened told them how the demon-possessed man had been delivered. Then everyone gathered from the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave their area because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and returned across the lake. The man from whom the demons had gone begged to come along with Jesus as one of his disciples. Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return home and tell the story of what God has done for you." So he went throughout the city proclaiming what Jesus had done for him.

Given that it now feels (almost) like summer, we begin our summer sermon series "To Bless the Space Between Us" based on a book by John O'Donohue.

After his unexpected death at the age of 53 in 2008, one of O'Donohue's friends described him as a "tall charming man with a twinkle in his eye." But O'Donohue himself would never describe himself by his looks, or even by his accomplishments, or acquaintances. He described himself primarily by the Atlantic-adjacent west Irish landscape in which he was raised. When asked what formed him most, he said it was the limestone, and this ever-living ancient conversation between ocean and stone.

He was formed by the cold northern Atlantic, the rugged mountains, the bogs, heaths, and grasslands. Geologically I suppose, it was formed well over a billion years ago, whereas our own Lake Michigan was still just a glacier some 14,000 years back, so I get it. His landscape speaks in eons. Time can slow. For O'Donohue, "the landscape wasn't just matter, it was alive... [pulling] you into a mindful mode of stillness, solitude,

and silence."¹ The ocean and limestone formed his spiritual sense of self, and come to think of it, maybe the landscape in which you were raised formed you in ways you have yet to notice.

He was pressed once to consider the possible privilege of all this. What of those who don't grow up surrounded by beauty? What of those who—like the character

Jesus meets in the gospel of Luke—who live among the tombstones? Or those who grow up amid violence and impossibilities? How might they find stillness, solitude, silence?

Pausing, he replied from a place of stillness, "the dawn goes up and the twilight comes, even in the most toughest inner-city place."²

In 2007 when he said all this, maybe he was referring to the sunrise over Baghdad where that year a truck bomb exploded killing 135 people.

Or maybe he meant the sun rising over Blacksburg Virginia, after 32 were shot at Virginia Tech that April.

Today we notice the sunrise in our own places.

The sun will rise this morning in the Donbas, he might remind us.

Or the sun will rise in Uvalde, Texas.

Or remember the way dawn breaks over every COVID patient in every hospital across the globe.

"He has lost that sense of beauty on the horizon."

¹ John O'Donohue, The Inner Landscape of Beauty from the On Being podcast by Krista Tippett, published February 28, 2008 just weeks after O'Donohue's death. It was one of the last interviews he recorded before he died. <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty/>

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty/>

And (he says) “I think that connecting to the elemental can be a way of coming into rhythm with the universe... as we are speaking (he goes on to say) there are individuals holding out on the frontlines, holding the human tissue alive in areas of ultimate barbarity, where things are visible that the human eye should never see. And they’re able to sustain it because there is in them some sense of beauty that knows the horizon that we are really called to in some sense.”³

When Jesus approaches the man who had been living among the tombs, his first words to Jesus are “don’t torture me.” He begs. “Don’t torture me.” He has lost that sense of *beauty on the horizon*. Jesus must have been just one of a long parade of healers who have tried to help this man, come hell or high water, using not just

ointments or tinctures or herbs, but probably unethical but sanctioned use of physical restraints, beatings, or worse. The community might shrug off the violence saying, “But what else were we to do?” He could after all literally break through shackles, and escape to the tombs, the realm of the dead. This man expected violence because violence had been all he had known even from those seemingly there to help.

When I think of this graveyard dwelling man I think of the man in Nassau, Bahamas who used to live in the cemetery down the ridge, but Pastor Isaac Villegas says this biblical scene is familiar to him in an equally haunting place. A correctional officer led him, Pastor Isaac, through a maximum security prison where he had been teaching classes, and that particular day five guards walked by with one single prisoner, leading him, encircling him, monitoring his every move, full restraints, wrists handcuffed together, a chain belt on his waist, shackles on his ankles, naked except for what looked like a miniskirt made out of a white plastic trash bag, his eyes a blank stare, a cold emptiness that likely mirrored the emptiness of staring at a concrete wall for 23 hours a day in solitary confinement.

“Seek out the
beauty of things,
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Healing is there.”

The guards on that unit, he later learned, had found a place where security cameras didn’t reach, and they would take turns torturing the inmates. Maybe later they shrugged and said, “What else were we to do?”

And so no wonder this man approaches Jesus begging “do not torture me.” He has known no other way. But in lieu of torture Jesus simply asks him his name. In that way Jesus confronts the demons that had been shadow-

ing him all the days of his life. Right there and then Jesus finds a way to rewrite the story. And later that evening, the man is dressed and in his right mind, sitting at Jesus’ feet. For those of you who have had to call the cops on a family member, for those of you who have watched the unraveling of a loved one, you know what kind of miracle this is. You know why the

townspeople were in disbelief. You know what it feels like to wait for what you see to be believable.

John O’Donohue’s last chapter in his book “To Bless the Space Between Us” is called “Beyond Endings.” The man who lived in the tombs could not see beyond-endings. Nor could his village. He could not see *an end* to living in the tombs. He could not see *an end* to the torture. His village could not see *an end* to the social isolation and the roaring legion of demons within. No one could not see him dressed and in his right mind.

Our imaginations cannot think “beyond endings” either. When O’Donohue blesses the space “beyond endings” he blesses, of course, the most human of endings, death. He blesses the dying, those entering death, and those on this side of death who know that grief is its own kind of ending.

When his own father died he wrote a poem for his mother saying, “And when your eyes freeze behind the grey window and the ghost of loss gets into you, may a flock of colors, indigo, red, green, and azure blue come to awaken you in a memo of delight.”⁴ He trusts that flock of colors to surround her, even in the grey of loss.

³ <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty/>

⁴ *Bennacht* John O’Donohue, *Echoes of Memory*, 1994, p. 8.

—Prayers of the People— The Reverend Christine V Hides

He knows beauty will accompany her from ending through to a place beyond endings where blessing can be heard. Seek out the beauty of things, he urges us. Healing is there. Blessing is there: even amid every kind of sorrow.

In our sacred texts, in the prophets, we hear a promise from God. “I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.” In other words, God has seen the ways in which our dreams are clouded, the ways our creative imaginations are dimmed. God has noticed the way we cannot see the blessing beyond the endings.

This is no “fake it till you make it” saccharine hope, positive thinking, or wish fulfillment where you just think happy thoughts. In this long lineage of old men dreaming dreams and young men seeing visions, John O’Donohue is pressing us toward blessing because “when we bless, we work from a place of inner vision, clearer than our hearts, brighter than our minds. Blessing (he says) is the art of harvesting the wisdom of the invisible world” blessing (he writes) suggests that no life is alone or unreachable...though suffering and chaos befall us, they can never quench that inner light.”⁵ Here healing is possible.

⁵ John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, 2008, p. xii.

This language of Christine’s prayer draws on the first three sections of the last chapter in John O’Donohue’s book “*To Bless the Space Between Us*,” which we are using in our summer worship series.

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Holy God, deep kindness, compassionate goodness, you dwell within and among us and in unexpected places. As we make summer journeys to the water’s edge, “the diffusions of light and color that glisten on the surface” bring “warmth and imagination to the landscape around us.” The beauty of the world reminds us of your presence, your generosity, your patience, and speaks to the deep longings of our soul. Let your grace resonate in our hearts, “casting a new light,” with “depth of color” able to illuminate “what is complex, and rich in difference.”

We approach you expectantly with our “roster of longings,” knowing you are the threshold where blessing comes alive, the place where beauty dwells.

So Holy One, bless us with your “unending feast of vision,” a vision “clothed in a rainbow of diverse colors,” and experiences. Throw the doors of our hearts and minds open wide with welcome for our new members and for all people.

Keep us from being distracted by the world, that is, in order that we might imagine the world as you do, “every stone, bush, raindrop, star, and mountain” a part of an “invisible communion with you, with all creation.” Reveal yourself to us in “fecund nearness” and “enigmatic distance”.

When the news is unrelenting, the notifications and pings unending and loud around us, open our hearts with care and compassion. Bless world leaders with wisdom, truth, and integrity in the midst of conflict and challenge. When the abysses of war and violence open, draw us nearer together, nearer to you. Show us the paths of peace.

Where there is a “gnawing emptiness,” where there is loneliness, where there is deep grief, or the feared diagnosis, strengthen us with your grace and open new possibilities. Bless especially the most vulnerable in the human family: children, those who live on the edges, the poor, those who are ill in body, mind, or spirit. Knowing you desire the flourishing of all people, we trust them to your care and recommit ourselves to love our neighbors.

Where there is weariness with work, the heavy labor of caregiving, or the repetitiveness of mundane chores, “coax our hearts to gratitude” for the small beauties around us. “Refresh us with inner vision.” Make each new day a “path of wonder,” an invitation to live with “the preciousness of time.”

You meet us, O God, in the depths, on the frontier, by the shoreline, in the unknown. Be our threshold of hope. Return us to the home we have in you, that we might joyfully proclaim all that you have done through Jesus who teaches us to pray...Our Father.... Amen.