

Bonaventure cemetery in Savannah, Georgia – the perfect cemetery.

Old headstones, famous people, intriguing monuments, and lots and lots of Spanish moss hanging from the trees. You could almost see the ghosts. If I were going to be demon-possessed and live among the tombs, that's where you'd find me. But, not naked. Oh, no. Too many mosquitos. When I read the gospel story of the Geresene demoniac, visions of Bonaventure dance in my head.

Bonaventure intrigues me because it doesn't 'purify' the cemetery experience. Headstones aren't all in straight rows. The pain of burying young children shows in the cradle-shaped grave markers. There is a certain chaos to it. The cemetery appears to oppose life and yet there's a certain energy that belies the opposition.

So much opposition exists in this gospel story, it boggles the mind.

Let's start with the location. The Gennesaret region is directly opposite the lake from Galilee. It contains the Decapolis – ten cities occupied by Roman citizens and

their accompanying forces. It is, therefore, directly opposite the belief system of kosher, Jewish Galilee.

Within this region opposite Galilee is a person living in opposition to his society. He is so outside the margins he's naked in a graveyard. He's so in opposition to himself he only hears voices in his head telling him he's less than human.

Into this chaos walks Jesus.

Jesus, who delivered Mary Magdalene from seven demons.

Jesus, who opposed the wind and waves and calmed the sea.

Jesus, who is known by the legion of spirits inhabiting the outcast person among the tombs.

Jesus walks into this unclean place and demands the legion possessing the Gerasene be gone. Jesus is the Great Opposer. He is of such powerful opposition that the demons beg him not to torture them. They know the power they are up against and throw themselves at its mercy.

The unclean spirits enter unclean pigs, who hurl themselves into a watery grave. Before their eyes, the legions of that Roman society become aware of Jesus' oppositional power as they watch their livelihood driven over a cliff. No wonder they "ask" him to leave.

What can we make of this tale of opposition? How does it work for us 20 centuries later?

As the Body of Christ, we can oppose the demons that threaten to exclude people from their rightful place in community.

We can oppose the demons named racism, ableism, sexism and other systemic sins by educating ourselves on they denigrate the divinity within our sisters and brothers.

We can oppose the demon named greed by acknowledging that we live in abundance, being grateful for what we have, and sharing our plenty with those in need.

We can oppose the demon named arrogance by realizing that all people are loved equally by God, thereby seeing one another as equals in God's sight.

We can oppose the demon named hate by holding those who foment discord and lies that violate the dignity of human being accountable for their actions.

We can oppose the legion that wish to create false dichotomies in order to divide us by taking the message of Christ's inclusive love into the places where it has been forgotten or ignored.

To be Christ the Opposer in this world requires commitment and courage. It's not a solo endeavor. It requires the gifts of the Spirit given to community. It requires us to remember that we are one family with one Father-Mother who loves every one of us beyond comprehension.

Opposing hatred, greed, racism, and arrogance requires the heart of a prophet. It requires the energy of an evangelist and the faith of the saints.

Like Isaiah, we must be willing to say “Here I am” to rebellious people, to people who believe that they are better than they are. “Here I am” with a message from the Lord our God. Like Paul, we must remind the world to focus on Christ’s love first and humankind’s oft-errant rules second.

There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female...these dichotomies meaning nothing to God. We are equally loved and equally valued by our Creator. In God’s eyes, there are no outcasts. In this church, there will be no outcasts. In this world, there should be no outcasts.

Jesus not only restored the Gerasene to sanity, he sent him back to his people. Telling the story of his encounter with Jesus, the former demoniac becomes the first Gentile evangelist. Sorry, Paul, you’re just going to have to take second place here.

Our mission is to seek out who have been marginalized, bind their wounds, nurse them to health, and help them return to community.

Cemeteries are interesting places to visit, especially those like Bonaventure – a community of the dead at the margin of Savannah’s city limits.

But no one should be forced to live in one.