

Nick Forward's Youth Sunday Sermon

February 12, 2017

Luke 8:26-39

The summer air was so thick with humidity and tension that each breath I took felt like equal parts water, air, and racial rancor. The first two were no problem to me; I was a lifeguard, trained to save swimmers from drowning.

It was early summer 2015, just a few weeks after our city exploded as protests spilled over into riots. The week after the riots, I began training at my first real job, a lifeguard at Bolton Hill Swim and Tennis, two blocks down the road from here. (point)

For those of you who don't know, BST is technically on the border between the neighborhoods of Bolton Hill and West Baltimore, but exist firmly in Bolton Hill. Membership is required, and while the outside of the fence bordering West Baltimore is often strewn with bottles of cheap alcohol, the inside shelters manicured grass, massive oaks trees, and clay tennis courts which could fit in at the French open.

My job included keeping the pool grounds up to Bolton Hill standard and that meant I spent time as the gatekeeper. Even though the only opening into the pool is on the Bolton Hill side, a daily occurrence was people from West Baltimore, mostly teenage boys, trying to gain admission to the pool. Invariably they would come with a few dollars in hand, wearing swim trunks and goggles. The boys would park their bikes outside, lean them up against the fence, and then grab them two minutes later and turn them around as I told them to go home. We weren't a public pool.

One day a young woman about my age and her toddler were dropped off in front of the pool. I could see hear the engine of the car that dropped her off, an old tired sound, which drove away, leaving them there. She walked up to the front desk. It was early in the day, only half an hour after the pool opened. The water was so undisturbed it appeared to be frozen, and there was no chatter coming from children on the playground. Without even considering the possibility that this woman and her son were members, I began my pre-recorded tirade on how this was a member's only pool, and that we would not accept the saved, wrinkled, twenty in her hand. The mom implored me to let her in. Although the sky was overcast and drooping barely above our heads, it was hot and she and her son had a long walk home if she couldn't use the pool. I remember her turning around and looking at the placid pool with a tired sense of indignation and sadness.

I watched the mother walk away and turn into West Baltimore through the fence. I heard her try to explain to her son right in front of me why they weren't allowed in the pool, and the questioning look of the boy's eyes through his goggles as he looked at the empty pool before being pulled away by his mother.

In the passage read earlier, the townspeople are angry with Jesus for forcing demons out of a societal outcast in their town, and understandably so. Jesus takes mercy on the demons that had possessed the man, and instead of banishing them, allowed the demons to live on in the pigs of the herders. The demons, instead of destroying the man, destroy the livelihoods of the swine herders of the village. Jesus then accepts this man with open arms into his faith a man, who, according to the text, was too poor to even have clothes, who, instead of sleeping in a bed, slept on

the cold slate of the dead. The man had been jailed, put in chains and shackles by his fellow men, but still, Jesus showed this man human compassion, healed him, held him in his arms. Jesus did not turn away from suffering, but instead grabbed it's hand and lifted it until it was no more.

The more I read the story of Jesus and the possessed man, the more I realized that as much as I wanted to be Jesus in the story, I wasn't. I, like the townspeople, made the conscious decision to put my livelihood over a person. When I rejected the woman and her little son grasping her fingers, I told them that my job was more important than accepting them.

But the reality is, I never viewed the other lifeguards at Bolton Swim and Tennis in a negative light after they told kids without memberships to go away. I wouldn't blame anyone in this church for doing the same thing I did in my situation. It's not always easy or feasible to bend over backwards to accept other people. And removing BST certainly isn't the reason either.

But that is why it is so crucial for the church to exist as a place that accepts anyone and everyone. The church needs to exist as a place where we can all put inclusion over ourselves, if only for an hour every Sunday morning. If we cannot dedicate even a single rotation of the clock each week to welcoming the outcasts, the down, the out-of-luck, into our community, then we are no better than the townspeople in the passage. If Jesus can open himself to a man possessed them demons, then we must throw open our doors for an hour on Sunday to welcome those chained down, whether they're chained up in Gerasenes or Baltimore City Jail. Thank you.