

It was a lovely Ottawa evening this past June. Several thousand children and adults had gathered to watch the RCMP's world-famous "Musical Ride" which showcases their horse-riding skills. Suddenly, the RCMP Emergency Response Team arrived with sirens screaming to capture two bad guys in a grey pickup. There was a brief "chase" in the horse ring, complete with lights and sirens, smoke bombs, a stun grenade, and an armoured tank-like vehicle. While this "takedown" was obviously staged, one of the fake culprits had a gun pointed at his face and was dragged through the driver's window. The second was tracked to a small hut that three more ERT members broke into. In a haze of smoke, he too was hauled away. And security was restored!

However, the families had come for the horses and the RCMP's red twill uniforms, not the body armour, helmets and high-powered rifles. One commentator responded, angrily: "Is there no place now where Canadians can be spared ... [this current] jingoistic militaristic bleating with its conjured-up images of dangers lurking around every corner, nurturing the fear that "others" are out to rob us of our freedoms?"¹ And this happened just a week or so after our government passed Bill C-51, the security and anti-terrorism legislation.

Indeed, we live in a context of growing fear—fear about terrorism. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the ensuing "War on Terror," the specter of terrorism both at home and abroad has gained urgency in our homes, churches and communities. During recent years, headlines have

¹ <http://www.frankkoller.com/2015/06/a-tasteless-jingoistic-paramilitary-embarrassment-at-the-rcmp-musical-ride/>

brought news of numerous terrorist attacks around the world. And then last summer, we all learned about a violent extremist group taking over a swath of territory in Syria and western Iraq. This group, called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was particularly brutal in attacking and killing Christians and other religious minorities. Canada quickly joined a U.S.- led military airstrike campaign against ISIS. Our country is once again at war.

All these developments have fostered a climate of fear in Canada. ISIS videos depicting brutal killings and beheadings, stories of young Canadians being recruited by terrorist groups, and images of Parliament Hill under attack a year ago have shaken many of us deeply. At the same time, the increased media and political attention on terrorist attacks seems to have exacerbated collective fear. One of the unfortunate products of the climate of fear is the reflexive association of terrorism with Islam. In many ways, Muslims have become the feared “other,” the ominous stranger.

In our Gospel of Mark scripture today, Jesus and his disciples also face fear and enemies. Chapter 4 begins with Jesus in Galilee teaching “beside the sea.” At the end of the day, he and the disciples embark for “the other side.” A “great gale” arises, the disciples fear perishing, but Jesus calms the storm. Let’s journey with Jesus, starting with the geography of this storm.

The Sea of Galilee was on the eastern border of Galilee; crossing to the other side meant going to “the country of the Gerasenes [Jehr-a-seens],” to the Decapolis. This meant going into enemy territory, into the heart of the Roman occupation.² This was where many thousands of Roman military veterans were stationed and settled. Yet Jesus said, “Let us go across to the other side.” Of

² Myers, p. 191ff.

course the disciples were terrified in the boat; how could they not be. Could it be that the great storm that rose up was within them, in their hearts and minds? The storm of their fear of “crossing to the other side”! Can we imagine the terror they must have felt? Can we imagine the terror we would feel, taking the initiative to go and meet the enemy. For the disciples, their enemy was also their oppressor who had huge power over them. And imagine too Jesus’ teachings that were reverberating in the disciples’ ears: “Blessed are the peacemakers,” “Love your enemies.”

So the disciples were filled with fear, a storm of fear, and awoke Jesus in panic. “Do you not care if we perish?” they ask accusingly. Their trust in Jesus was being tested. When our trust is stretched to the limit, how do we respond? In times of great storms, Jesus asked the disciples, and he asks us today, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Jesus calms the storm, but insists that they – and we – continue crossing to the other side. The other side. While Canada is not occupied by a foreign empire as was Jesus’ land, our country is at war against extremist Islamists in the Middle East. In addition to carrying out violent attacks targeting civilians and religious minorities, ISIS has also encouraged acts of terrorism abroad, including here in Canada. Many voices have sounded the alarm of Islamic extremism here at home, suggesting we ought to be fearful, very fearful.

And many of us are fearful. Indeed, even as Canadians of all political stripes cried out “let them in” in response to the searing picture of Alan Kurdi, the drowned Syrian boy whose body washed up on a Turkish beach two weeks ago, numerous voices also said loudly that we must not expedite refugee processing because there might be terrorists among them. Did you see the cartoon featuring

the Trojan horse outside the gates of Europe with a sign saying “refugees” on the front and “ISIS” on the back? Ryan Dueck, pastor of Lethbridge Mennonite Church in Alberta, reported this past Wednesday that he has seen many Christians posting that cartoon on social media, along with articles about ISIS flags in Germany and about Muslim refugees throwing Christians off boats in the Mediterranean.³

Increasingly, Muslims are being portrayed as “other” and as “enemy.” And yet Muslims of all stripes and colours are our neighbours—literally! —in our neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces. Have we taken the time to “cross to the other side” to get to know them? Again, Jesus asks us to trust him, to trust his Way. Crossing to the other side.

Let’s continue our journey with Jesus and the disciples in Mark’s gospel. They arrive at the other side where they are met by a man with “an unclean spirit” named “Legion,” who lives “among the tombs.” Jesus heals the demoniac, and the unclean spirits enter “a great herd of swine” who then rush down the steep hill into the sea and drown. Let’s explore this story more deeply in order to understand its profound symbolic meanings.⁴ It’s a story about facing fears and enemies.

So Jesus and the disciples cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and enter the Decapolis, an area of cities colonised with settlements of Roman soldiers, veterans – the enemy oppressors. They are greeted by a wild man with an unclean spirit who screams, “What have you to do with me? Do not torment me.” Let’s think of this man as a symbol of the Roman Empire’s oppression, and of its militarism and war. Here’s why.

³ <http://ryandueck.com/2015/09/16/im-sorry-christian-but-you-dont-get-to-make-that-move/>

⁴ This interpretation is derived primarily, but not completely, from the work of John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York City: HarperCollins, 1995) and Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

The unclean spirit possessing the man says, “Legion is my name.” Now, “legion” was a division of 2000 Roman soldiers. These legions were stationed in the Decapolis to control that part of the Roman Empire. And “a great herd of swine” is not a reference to a literal group of pigs, but rather a large group of military recruits. “Pig” was also the mascot of some Roman legions and in addition was a derisive name for new military soldiers. Just like in English, the centuries old tradition of insulting police officers by calling them “pigs,” Mark uses “pigs” as a symbol for the Roman military. The demons possessing the man are also representative of Roman militarism and its hegemony. Notice that Mark switches in mid-story from singular to plural to refer to these spirits. Jesus expels these demons, and the unclean spirits – representing militarism, oppression and war – enter the pigs who then run into the sea and drown. Liberation! A clear parallel to Exodus. The enemy drowns in the sea. This was the yearning of the occupied and oppressed Jewish people; just as with their Exodus liberation from slavery in Egypt a thousand years or so earlier, their oppressors would drown in the sea. However, Jesus doesn’t end the story that way. Let’s continue with Mark.

After Jesus expels the demons into the pigs and they drown, the “swineherds” run and tell what happened “in the city and in the country,” among the settlements and barracks of the Roman military. The people come running to see for themselves, and when they find the demoniac in his right mind, they become afraid. So they beg Jesus to leave, to go back to Galilee, to leave the Roman military settlements. Jesus and the disciples comply. However, as they start to leave – “as he was getting into the boat” – the healed man asks to go with them, to join them. But Jesus says no, and sends him back to his community: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” And so the man does exactly that.

Notice that the local Roman authorities didn't use their weapons to force Jesus to leave. Perhaps they realized that they were dealing with a power greater than military might, the power of love, mercy, and nonviolence. And Jesus gives the healed man a mission: stay among your people – including the Roman military – and share the story of the downfall of the power of violence and military might, and of the ascendancy of love and mercy.

As followers of Jesus, we are called live out this love and mercy daily, and to see and find God's presence among everyone we meet. In our current context and climate of fear, we are called to "cross to the other side," to encounter our "enemies" or those labelled as "other," as "stranger," and to offer love and friendship as Jesus would. I wonder, if we today built relationships with our neighbours who are Muslims, including those who may have extremist tendencies who understand Christianity through the lens of the Crusades and the War on Terror, then perhaps a new understanding of at least some of the "Christian West" would start to permeate, both for them and the armed extremist groups.

Can we also engage those who sow fear among us in Canada, including our government, our media and those in our churches, who would have us see terrorists all around us? Refusing to succumb to the climate of fear will be essential if new understandings and relationships among us all are to emerge.

Last Sunday, Michele preached on the first half of Romans 12, so this Sunday we'll finish the chapter, as it is also part of our journey with Jesus "crossing to the other side." Paul's letter to the Romans is likely the last one Paul wrote,⁵ and because Paul had never visited this group, and thus had no first-hand knowledge of the Roman congregation, in chapter 12 we have only general teachings and

⁵ Most scholars date Romans around 57 C.E. (give or take a year), while his first letter, 1 Thessalonians, was written about 51 C.E. Paul's other letters fall in between these two. Paul died about 10 years after writing the letter to the Romans, so he quite possibly wrote other letters. These hypothetical letters, however, are not extant.

exhortations. However, these teachings, written around 25 years before the Gospels of Matthew and Luke,⁶ probably contain an early version of some of Jesus' teachings, perhaps the earliest written version in existence of some of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount".⁷

How might these teachings from Jesus combined with the exhortations from Paul inform our response to the realities of terrorism, fear of the stranger and relating to the "other"? For many today, militant and extremist Islamists represent unbridled evil, a clear enemy, and loud voices link their extremist teachings with the many fellow Canadians who are also Muslims.

As first century Jews, Jesus and Paul also faced a very clear enemy. The Roman Empire and its military power represented real terror in the lives of most Jews.⁸ In addition, the Roman "Gentiles" were the obvious "stranger," the clear "other" for them, and indeed for all first century followers of Jesus.⁹

Let's listen to Paul and Jesus' urgings in Romans 12, keeping in mind both the first century Jewish context and our context today:

- "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good."
- "Extend hospitality to strangers."
- "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."
- "Do not repay anyone evil for evil."
- "Live peaceably with all."
- "Never avenge yourselves."

⁶ 4 Matthew and Luke are dated 80-85 C.E.

⁷ Note especially verses 14-15, 17, and 20-21, and compare Paul's words there to Jesus' teachings in Matthew 5.44 and Luke 6.27.

⁸ Paul did appeal to the Roman emperor once and claim his Roman citizenship at times. However, these seem to be more for legal reasons rather than identity proclamations.

⁹ Ephesians 2.11ff: "For he [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

- “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.”¹⁰
- “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

In other words, treat your enemies kindly, even treat them as friends, for the best way to get rid of an enemy is to turn her or him into a friend. And thus, as Paul concludes, evil is overcome with good.

Jesus and Paul, in both Romans 12 and in the story from Mark, call us to examine how we treat our enemies, real or perceived. While we personally don't drop bombs on them, do we include them in our society? In our communities? Recent research has shown that the numerous Canadian teens and young adults who have been recruited by ISIS have been driven to violent extremism by their sense of deep alienation and isolation from “mainstream” society. Their sense of not belonging, and of being rejected by Canadians, has played a significant role in their vulnerability to extremist recruitment. However, Jesus and Paul call us to befriend the enemy, to embrace the stranger, and in doing so we “overcome evil with good.”

Our faith invites us to live faithfully in a world permeated by the fear caused by extremist violence. It encourages us to face our fears, even while refusing to be consumed by them. It invites us to reach out in friendship and love to Muslim neighbours and newcomers, and to resist stereotyping Muslims as terrorists. Our faith calls us to renounce all violence and place our trust and hope, not in military might, but rather in the One who calms the storm and calls us to join him crossing to the other side. Amen.

¹⁰ “for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” What about the reference to heaping burning coals on your enemies' head by feeding them? Note the quotation marks in verse 20; we cannot know whether Paul is quoting Jesus. In any case, this phrase, and indeed all of verse 20, is from Proverbs 25.21f. Perhaps the burning coals originally meant intensified retribution. However, here in this context of Paul's and Jesus' teachings, it takes on a loftier meaning with a different intent.