

Proper 7, Year C

- There's a principle in psychology called "cognitive dissonance" – used to describe the psychological discomfort of holding beliefs that are in conflict with each other, or of acting in a way inconsistent with the beliefs that one holds
- There are a number of examples out there, but one that you'll almost always hear is the example of people who smoke, even while knowing how bad smoking is for your health
- I say that not to pick on smokers, especially as someone who used to be one, but it's a favorite example of psychology textbooks everywhere
- We don't like to think of ourselves as contradictory, or hypocrites, so when cognitive dissonance occurs, we have to find some way to resolve it – can do this a number of ways:
 - Can say, "it's complicated", and focus on all the other variables that make the thing we're doing or believing that's in conflict seem less bad – so, for example, if we care about the environment and climate change yet drive a car that gets terrible mileage, we might focus on the fact that our solitary vehicle isn't likely to make or break the planet on its own – its impact alone isn't really that significant, we might say to ourselves
 - We can downplay the importance of the conflicting belief – so, if we don't have a healthy diet, for example, we can tell ourselves that the exercise we get and the multivitamin we take more than make up for the food that we shouldn't be eating, but are
- Suffice it to say that we've gotten very good at finding rationalizations for our conflicting belief, and for letting ourselves off the hook, in part because there is a **lot** of cognitive dissonance in the world and in our lives today
- But we haven't even talked about my all-time favorite example of cognitive dissonance: Christianity. Being a follower and worshiper of Christ
- I was thinking about cognitive dissonance a great deal as I was preparing for this sermon, especially reading our Psalm for today
- Not only because it's a selection from Psalm 22, the Psalm that Jesus alludes to in his cry of dereliction from the cross, the one we hear during Holy Week: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" – which one could read as its own kind of divine cognitive dissonance
- But also because I was struck this week by two verses from it:
- "My praise is of him in the great assembly; I will perform my vows in the presence of those

who worship him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and those who seek the Lord shall praise him: ‘May your heart live for ever!’”

- Those two verses together help highlight exactly why there is always some measure of cognitive dissonance in being a Christian
- Because Every Sunday, like the psalmist says, our praise is of him in the great assembly: we gather together to remember Christ and all that God has done for us in Christ
- And every Sunday, we all gather together in the same place, tell the same stories and are fed the same food
- Every Sunday, we’re reminded of the vision that God has for the world
- Every Sunday, we are oriented toward the Kingdom of God in the reality of the font that makes us one Body, and the table where all are equal before God
- And then, after an hour of being confronted with, oriented toward that reality, we go out into the world where that reality doesn’t yet exist
- We step out after praising God into a world where the poor don’t always eat, aren’t always satisfied – where not all who seek the Lord end up praising him
- There is, or at least there is meant to be, a dissonance between what we profess, what we enact and encounter in the liturgy, and the world outside and our actions in it
- Our liturgy, our worship, is dangerous – because it borders on self-critique – meant to unsettle us, make us uncomfortable – meant to make us realize that dissonance, that gap between what we preach and what we practice
- Because awareness of that gap, hopefully, makes us want to resolve that dissonance – and as I said before, there are only a few ways to do that
- Sometimes we want to ignore the dissonance! Like the people in the country of the Gerasenes, in our Gospel today – what did they do when Jesus healed a man that they just **knew** was a bad guy, a troublemaker, a disturbed individual who couldn’t be trusted, was mentally unstable, even dangerous? Confronted with the fact that Jesus wanted them to treat this outcast like a beloved child of God, they didn’t just ignore it – they even asked Jesus to leave, so that without him as a reminder, they could pretend it had never happened!
- We have gotten very good at explaining it away, at finding rationalizations for why we shouldn’t actually do what God asks us to do
- But there’s one other way we deal with it – possibly the only truly effective way of resolving cognitive dissonance

- That's by changing our selves – by bringing our actions in line with our stated beliefs – by actually practicing what we preach, making sure that our praise translates into action
- When we do that, we don't just downplay or minimize that conflict taking place within ourselves – but we put ourselves at peace by putting aligning our own will with God's
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- When we gather here every week, we encounter the awesome reality of God's holiness, before which we are all equal, all individually seemingly insignificant and yet deeply beloved children of God
- And we go out into a world that is clearly not in sync with that reality, is clearly not yet aligned with God's vision for it
- But we bear our worship out into the world with us – hopefully tugging at us, gnawing at us a little, making us think that something isn't quite right, isn't quite in tune
- And because of that, I like to think maybe God smiles when we're made a little uncomfortable – when this conflict within us makes us think, “How can I resolve this?”
- “How can I change myself, so the world looks a little bit more like the Kingdom of God?”