

June 19, 2022 Pentecost 2C
Ministry Among the Tombs
Luke 8:26-39

Let's look for a minute at the story of this guy referred to as the Gerasene demoniac. The story doesn't get a lot of attention in preaching these days, and that's a shame. There's some really good stuff here, some obvious, some hidden. Also, it's very handy to have it coupled with our Epistle reading-- Paul's words in Galatians. The two readings help each other.

Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee and landed in Gentile territory. On the way over He has calmed a stormy sea and shown His disciples His power over nature. Now He lands and his attention is drawn immediately to a guy who lives in the graveyard, who's naked. People have tried to chain him up, but he breaks the chain. In Mark's account of the same story, we learn that he cuts himself with stones and screams all night.

If we walked out of church and encountered this guy today, we would label him as mentally ill. That's how we deal with those we see as less than "normal" humans. We're more comfortable with that than with terms like "demon-possessed." So we give them a label and usually de-humanize them in order to deal with them. And I feel certain that centuries, or perhaps decades from now, people will come up with a different category.

When Jesus got off the boat, He didn't see a label or a demon. He saw a human and the pain of that human and He did something about it. And the next time the townspeople see the guy, he is in his right mind, he is fully dressed, he is kneeling at the feet of Jesus and he is told to go home.

And the people are afraid. I think there is more going on here than just people afraid of Jesus' power. If you've ever been close to a person dealing with mental illness who has been healed and become mentally healthy, that person wants everyone around them to be healthy too. But the people around them have rearranged their lives to deal with that person's mental illness or that person's addiction. They've become co-dependent upon that illness or addiction and developed their own unhealthiness. It is how they dealt with the other person's mental illness. They've taken on their own demons. And the formerly mentally ill person who is now healthy wants everyone around them to be healthy too and that causes a problem.

Demons, we all have our demons, in a way. But it's become a metaphor for anything we struggle with. These days, we don't do demons, at least not real demons and not much. We don't have a category for that. But it's not a big deal; and it's sure not worth all the effort folks put into trying to force this square peg into the round hole of our current categories. Instead of that, let's see what's going on here; and let's see where the gospel is and what our response is to tormented humans.

On one really important level, the story is a hoot—it's somewhere between a political cartoon and a graphic novel. The whole scene is bizarre. You've got a naked crazy guy, chatty demons, charging pigs doing swan dives, tombs, chains, shackles, freaked-out locals, and a small riot. All in gentile territory where, as far as many were concerned, Jesus had no business being in the first place.

The folks who first heard this story must have loved it. In addition to the great action and dialogue, there was ancient regional rivalry.

What could be more fun for the good Jews of Galilee to hear than a story about how un-kosher, unlucky, and generally weird the gentiles on the other side of the lake really were; and about how all those unclean pigs came to a well-deserved and hilarious end.

Then there's the political subtext. Everybody knew instantly both that it was no accident that the demons called themselves "Legion" after the famous and feared Roman legions, or that pigs were a staple of both the Roman army and the Roman economy. Caesar's legions, and Caesar's rations, were mere child's play for Jesus--a quick flush and they're gone. What fun. And most Romans who heard the story probably wouldn't even get this part.

But as delightful as all this is, this is much more than a mildly comic interlude in Jesus' Galilean ministry. It's really good news, and it's good news about power--all sorts of power. The Gerasene demoniac appears just after the more familiar account of Jesus calming the storm on the lake. In fact, the storm was on the very same trip that took Jesus and the disciples to Gerasene. Both of these accounts are part of Luke's run-up to the big question Jesus asks his disciples in the next chapter: "Who do you say that I am?" In fact, all of these stories are hints about what the right

answer is; so they all are not so much stories about what Jesus did, but about who he is.

And who Jesus is has to do with power and it has to do with compassion. It has to do with which, of all the powers in the universe, regardless of what categories we use to talk about them, are the strongest, which powers will have the last word. And it has to do with compassion that causes Jesus to look at those the world doesn't want to look at and helping those the world doesn't want to help. It has to do with Jesus using power and compassion to show the world who He is.

You see, there are a lot of powers out there, powers that can, and do, hurt and isolate and torment and destroy-- in all sorts of ways. The categories we use to describe them don't really matter that much. Whether we live in a world full of demons or schizophrenics, of storm-gods or indifferent natural laws, of illness or of possession--regardless of the categories we use, we live in a dangerous world, a frightening world, a world that seems at both first and second glance to be pretty much against us. We live in a world that doesn't seem to care about us or our pain. We know this all too well.

And the story of the Gerasene demoniac, like the story of the calming of the sea, like so many of the other stories about what Jesus did, and about who Jesus is, these are ways of saying that all of those powers out there, regardless of how we name them or organize them, regardless of how real they are, and regardless of how awful they are-- none of them is ultimately powerful, none of them has or will have the last word, none of them will prevail, ultimately. In the end, when all is said and done, we are safe. And the power that Jesus brings, the power of love, the power we see most clearly on the cross, that power will prevail. And this victory is ours by gift.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what is lined up against us. Look, the Gerasene demoniac had more to worry about than his demons. He was also a pariah, cut off from family, friends, community, relationships-- from all those connections that together weave the fabric of our humanity. That isolation, that apart-ness, was also the victory of powers, perhaps powers we humans create, powers that can destroy as effectively, and as completely, as madness or storms.

Still, by the time Jesus got through with him, our demoniac was on the other side of those as well. He was not only in his right mind, but he was, as they say, dressed appropriately; and Jesus told him to go to his home, a home he didn't have when our story began. He was given the fullness of his life back. Remember, there are all sorts of powers out there; and all sorts of victories.

This is part of what Paul is talking about when he insists that, in Christ, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female." Paul is saying that these distinctions, and others, these powers of the social, economic, ecclesiastical, and political structures-- as ancient, hallowed, destructive, and potent as they were, and as they are--these are powers that will fall, and that have fallen, before Jesus. Their voices are not the strongest voices, and they will not have the last word. It is our vocation to oppose them, and by God's grace they should not, and ultimately they cannot, separate, isolate, define, or destroy us.

Because the love that Jesus is, and the love that Jesus brings, is stronger than anything, even the worst, the very worst, that the world can throw at us. That's who Jesus is—that's what these stories are all about, that's the big story, regardless of the categories and the worldviews we use to talk about them.

And that is good news.

Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you. So, we go away, proclaiming throughout the cities and towns, how much Jesus has done for us. Amen.