

2 Pentecost Luke 8:26-39
Christ and Grace June 23, 2019
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I don't think there is another story in scripture that is more bizarre than this one. I think it's a good reminder for us that when we are following Jesus, anything might happen. And maybe that unsettles us just a bit. I wanted to preach on Elijah in the cave, hearing God in the silence, but I knew that we could not just read this Gospel in church and pretend we didn't hear it. A version of this story appears in 3 of the Gospels, indicating that it was widely known. Sometimes called the miracle of the swine or the deviled ham story, this very odd healing miracle may have more to do with us than we think and may help us consider our own demons.

Luke tells us Jesus crossed over from Galilee to the country of the Gerasenes, For Luke, this is the one time Jesus goes deliberately into Gentile territory. He encounters a man possessed by so many demons that he's lost his identity – when Jesus asks him his name, all he can say is “Legion,” because there are so many demons in him. He is no longer in his right mind and can't remember his name, he does not remember who he was created to be.

This man is often put in chains and shackles to keep him from hurting himself or others. The demons within recognize Jesus and they fear him. With permission from Jesus, they come out of the man and enter a herd of pigs. The pigs rush down the steep bank into the lake and are drowned. After that, the man is found “sitting at the feet of Jesus and restored to his right mind.”

If someone asked you, “What are your demons?” How would you answer that? It's an odd and perhaps unsettling question, isn't it? But I think it might be helpful for us to take some time to consider the question; to sit still, away from the rush and fear and stress of the world, kind of like Elijah did in the cave when he realized he could not outrun his demons. When we listen for the voice of God in the sheer silence, the demons that may be stripping us of our identity as a child of God will flee.

Naming our demons is hard work. This question, “What are your demons?” is a very personal question, an intimate and psychologically probing question. Almost as if our demons are an important, but secret, part of who we are. As the saying goes, better the devil you know than the devil you don't, perhaps making us fearful of exorcising them. So what are your demons?

Insecurity is a demon that occupies many of us. Depression is another. The need to be in control. The need to be right, or to have the right answers. The desire for money. The longing for approval, to be highly regarded, ... The list of demons goes on and on.

In their milder forms, these seem like ordinary human tendencies. But demons are known to take something ordinary and natural, and twist it into something addicting or into something so controlling that we lose our identity in it. C. S. Lewis describes this so well in “The Screwtape Letters.” Quoting the Enemy, the demons, he says, “ [God] wants [humans] to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them.”

Money, for example, is important for basic needs, but how easily the desire for money becomes greed, or the fear of not having enough of it becomes a controlling obsession, so that our work is never done, our material needs never quite seem to be satisfied, and it's hard to imagine giving much of it away. And don't we all have a need for love and approval, but how easily this can become an unquenchable desire to possess or control someone, or a complete loss of self as we allow others to control us.

The truth is, our demons can be legion, and they can take over our lives, becoming harmful to ourselves and harmful to others. They can destroy our identity, so that we are no longer who we were, but we become an amalgam of powers and influences, desires and fears, that can cause us to lash out inappropriately or simply to lose touch with who we are and what is most important in life.

When the Gospel lesson says that the man formerly possessed by demons was found sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, I think it's showing us what salvation is all about. Our salvation is all about returning to the One in whose image we are made. It's about recalling the Presence that is always with and within us, no matter how far we run or how deeply in the cave or the tombs we hide. And it is about the grace of remembering what is truly important in life, and most importantly, who we are as God's beloved.

Notice how the Gospel lesson ends. The man who has been restored to his right mind wants to go with Jesus, but Jesus says, "No." Jesus tells the man to go home. "Go home and focus on all that God has done for you." In this one sentence, I think we have an exhortation we all need to hear. "Go home and declare how much God has done for you."

If the man goes home determined to speak about how much God has done for him, he is going home with a very particular focus and agenda for his life. He will not spend his days complaining about all the things that have gone wrong in his life. And he won't spend his days worrying about what might happen next in his life.

Instead, if he does what Jesus tells him to do, he will spend his days devoted to what the earliest Christians called a state of recollection – recalling who we are, remembering God's Presence, and giving thanks for what God has done, restored to his true self and at peace at the feet of Jesus.

As I thought about the Gerasene demoniac, I thought about a time earlier in my ministry when I was a chaplain in a memory care facility. The staff would tell me the residents were mostly non-communicative and sometimes combative, needing to be restrained for their own protection. But I found that when I would pray the Lord's Prayer or sing the old familiar hymns with them, these beloved children of God would return to a place of mindfulness and awareness of God's presence. I could see them sitting there, at the feet of Jesus and in their right mind.

I think this is why many of us come to church, week after week. It helps us to return to a quiet place at the feet of Jesus – that is, to the presence of God, ...to be restored to our right mind or our truest self, and then to be sent home again with renewed resolve and focus, not on what is wrong, but on all that God has done for us.

Each of us have our demons that can keep us focused on the wrong things and out of touch with our true life and identity. But we also have an abiding and centering Presence within, to which we can return and be restored. And remembering this can help us to be gentle and forgiving with each other. Go home, Jesus says, remember what God has done for you, and then do the same for each other.

Amen.

I am indebted to Gary Jones for much help with this sermon.