

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor John Swanson

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The Sermon Text — Luke 8:26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”- for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

SERMON

Ours is an age that is filled with demons. We are faced with demon possession on a regular basis and it seems as if it is only getting worse. And the problem is that we do not want to mention it because demons are part of the mythical past. We, in our scientific world, do not believe in demons. That is because demons are powers that take away our control and leave us at the mercy of powers outside ourselves.

Perhaps some of you are wondering what in the world I am talking about; after all, the demon that is described here in Luke seems foreign to us. There is no question that modern ears have trouble hearing this story. We would understand it better if the poor man were simply described as mentally ill. We are not comfortable in either giving credit or blame for the events of our lives to unseen beings. We would rather understand the story, as one more example of Jesus’ deep compassion for hurting individuals and an affirmation of his marvelous power to heal even when our afflictions are “legion,” are many.

But that would oversimplify the story. This story is about MORE than healing; it is about confronting evil - in the language of first century theology, DEMONS. The best that the townspeople could do was to control the problem by isolating it in the outskirts of their society - the graveyard - but Jesus was prepared to deal with it head on - to get rid of it all together - even though, as the story makes clear, the community was not ready to have that happen. Jesus did it anyway.

I want to look at this story for what it is, to see how Jesus deals with something that makes us feel uncomfortable and to see how we might learn from this story. I think if we can translate some of what is in this text, we just might gain some useful tools in dealing with our world.

Jesus and his disciples had sailed across the Sea of Galilee to the territory of Gerasa. Gerasa was on the non-Jewish side of Galilee, where many Jews resided as strangers in a strange land. The first person he meets is an individual who is possessed by demons, a man who lives in the local cemetery for lack of a better place. He is feared by his neighbors, who have apparently tried to chain him up and keep him clothed for his own safety and that of the community.

He verbally assaults Jesus because, Luke tells us, Jesus had ordered the evil spirits to leave the man. We are a little amazed by the fact that at this point Jesus has a discussion with the demons that possess the man. Jesus inquires about the name of the demon, who exclaims, “My name is Legion.” The demons then beg Jesus not to banish them from the earth by sending them to the abyss, the way station for evil spirits that had to wait for their final punishment.

Jesus does not send them to that final destination; instead, he decides to inflict them on a herd of pigs that happen to be nearby. The infected pigs rush down to a nearby cliff and like an army of lemmings hurl themselves off into the lake to be drowned. The pig herders rush off to spread the news of what they have witnessed, and no doubt to report the loss of their pigs to the local authorities.

The local people race out to see for themselves what has happened, and discover Jesus in a congenial discussion with the person they knew to be a mad man. This man is sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. The demons are gone and things seem to be normal. And how does the crowd react? They react with fear.

Eyewitnesses tell them about how the healing occurred. They see that the man has been cured. And their appreciative response to the healing? They ask Jesus to hit the road, to get out.

The man who had been healed begged Jesus to allow him to go with them, but Jesus sent him away, telling him to

go back home and witness to what God had done to him and for him. The last we hear of the man is that he is doing just that.

Now you see, the problem we have with this story is that we get caught up with the demons that appear in it. We start conjuring up all sorts of possibilities to explain the demons. Maybe they are these little supernatural creatures that look like gargoyles on the tops of medieval buildings. Maybe the man was suffering from seizures caused by some sort of medical problem. Maybe the man was prone to manic-depressive episodes that required medication that they simply did not have. Maybe ... Maybe ... Maybe.

It is easy to get so caught up in the story that we miss the point. Jesus has the power to overcome the demons that infested his age and he has the power to overcome the demons that infest our age. That is what Luke hoped to suggest in his repeating of this story. Remember that Luke was a physician, someone who, even with a very primitive understanding, still understood some things about the nature of human beings and illness. But Luke was also aware of demons and how they affected the world and people's reactions to those who had demons.

You would think that someone who had been healed of demon possession would have been the center of joy and celebration, and the one who was responsible for that healing would be treated with great respect and admiration. Instead, Jesus is run out of town. Apparently healing someone with demons is not the way to get praise and adoration.

When we hear the words "demon possession," many of us go back to the movie *The Exorcist*. We think of the sleepless nights and unspoken fears that were created by that film. And when film-goers discovered that the movie was based on a real situation, their fears were even greater. But that kind of demon possession only serves to make this story more distant, rather than help us realize how many demons there are all around us.

In Jesus' time, demons were seen as supernatural creatures that took control of an individual when they were not expecting it. They made individuals act in ways that were not acceptable. The individual was lost, and the demon became central in all that the individual did. That is why Jesus was able to speak with the demon that possessed this man. It was as though the individual wasn't even there. The man was an observer who could not participate in the world because the demon was in charge.

The demon was different than sin. Sin was what an individual did. It was disobedience to the will of God. A demon took control and in many ways, the individual was beyond the arena of sin. When you had a demon, you were not yourself. The demon and the self were in a constant struggle for control. In the case of the man that Jesus dealt with, the demon had already won. By chaining him up, his friends were actually doing him a favor. They were keeping the demon at bay.

Jesus stepped in and ended the demon's control. Perhaps that is why the people in the community were so afraid. Jesus was showing a power that was not only greater than the human world, but greater than even the spiritual

world. To do what he did went beyond anything they could fathom.

One of the things we need to deal with is that there are demons in our world. We speak of them all the time; things that slowly, mysteriously and dangerously take over our bodies, our lives, so that we are the person God made us to be.

Drug addiction is a demon. Addicts consistently speak of being possessed by the need for their chemical demons. Heroin, cocaine, crack, meth, call them what you will, but they are still "Legion" in the battle for human souls.

Power is a demon. And it not only affects individuals, people who must have power to prove their worth, but it also affects nations. Nations seek to control and maintain without a sense for the need of justice and mercy. And when that power rises to a crescendo, we see the results in a Hitler or the Klan, or other groups that thrive on hatred and fear. Power misused can easily consume and corrupt, leading to actions that are harmful and immoral.

Illness is a demon. With all of our scientific expertise, you would think that we would be able to put away this demon, but we haven't. In all likelihood, that was the demon of the story we started with this morning. Mental illness is still just as powerful and divisive as ever. It comes as a curse, and we treat its victims as pariahs to be shunned and isolated. The word cancer can make us squirm with discomfort and fear. We run away rather than offering our support and care. AIDS is just as demonic as any other worldly creature. It ravages individuals while others seek to pretend it will go away if one ignores it long enough.

Greed is a demon, threatening to make us slaves of want. It has always been one of the deadly sins, but today the desire to have and to hold is something that many in our society prize and encourage to dangerous levels. Think of Bernie Mac and Kenneth Lay. Possessions become more important than people, more important than faith, more important than anything.

As the scripture passage reminds us, the demons are legion. They enslave the individual, destroy the valuable, and release the very worst in us. The only way we can hope to cope with them is to come face to face with One who can overcome the demons and make us willing to calmly sit at His feet.

In Jesus, there is hope. Hope that assures us that we do not have to be controlled by any kind of demon. The demons of our time, just like the demons of long ago, stand no chance against Jesus. That was good news then and it is certainly good news today. Amen. © 2010