

Sunday, June 23, 2019
Second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 7 (Year C)
Luke 8.26-39
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Anyone here possessed by a demon? Given our Gospel reading for today, I kind of had to ask.

When I prepare sermons, I look at what is happening in the readings and try to determine what it mean for us today, 2,000 years later and half a world away. Often times, what we see happening or hear said in a particular reading may not make a whole lot of sense to our 21st century American way of thinking. In which case, we sometimes need to take a step back and look at how what happens would have been perceived in Jesus' time. To consider the historical, cultural, or religious context surrounding the readings. Based on a first century Middle Eastern understanding of the message being conveyed, I then seek to translate the message in such a way that it makes sense to us. Based on that, we can then explore what the central message means for us today. This is not always a linear process, sometime looping back on itself or heading off on tangents.

Today's Gospel reading was a bit of a challenge. I mean, demons? Really? What do I do with that? What does demon possession have to do with us? I mean, that I know of, I don't have any parishioners who are possessed by demons. Let alone a legion of demons. That I know of, none of my parishioners have to be chained up by their loved ones to prevent them from hurting others or themselves. That I know of, none of my parishioners run around cemeteries naked. But hey, what you do on your own time is your business. Who am I to judge?

On its surface, the reading from the Gospel according to Luke appears to be a simple exorcism story. Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee to the city of Gerasa. This was definitely a Gentile community, given it was east of the Jordan River, and the fact that one of the main sources of income was raising pigs (Jews would never have raised pigs). Upon arriving in Gerasa, Jesus is met by a man who is possessed by demons. The demons recognize who Jesus is: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" Jesus comes to find out that the local community is fearful of the demoniac and has made attempts to confine the man, guarding him and binding him in chains and shackles. But to no avail. The man always breaks free. He is unable to restrain himself or to be restrained by others. As a result, he is essentially abandoned by his community. He is naked and alone, living in the shadows of society, among the tombs—among the dead, as if he himself were, in a sense, dead.

When Jesus asks the man his name, he responds, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him." But there is an even deeper meaning in this name. To the original hearers of this story, "Legion" would have had only one meaning. A unit of approximately 6,000 Roman soldiers. The foreign army that occupied their land and oppressed their people. The image of "Legion" would have conveyed a message of imprisonment, bondage, and oppression. A message that was reinforced in the physical reality of the man being "kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles." So for the people who originally heard this story, who originally read the account as recorded by Luke, this was not just a story of healing, of the exorcism of demons. First and

foremost, it would have been heard as a story of liberation from overwhelming oppression. A message that would have been heard as the hope and promise for liberation from the political oppression of the Roman Empire. But which could also have been heard as a message of liberation from other forms of social constraint or oppression.

This likely explains the reaction of the people of Gerasa to the healing of the demoniac. That they are fearful and do not celebrate the good news of the man's healing. Even though the legion of demons has been expelled, the memory remains. The underlying forms of oppression remain. Freedom is a dangerous thing. It can be costly, because it means changing our attitudes and even the way we operate. It's often easier to accept the smaller things that enslave us rather than embrace the overwhelming power that brings change and ultimately liberates us.

Rather than go down the path of any of the myriad ways we could apply this message to various forms of political or social oppression, I prefer to stick with the presenting theme of oppression by demons. While we do not often encounter actual possession by demons, other than in movies, in our own time and culture we often talk about and use the language of someone having their own "inner demons" as a way of referring to some psychological or even psychiatric issue that a person is struggling with.

Some scholars have questioned whether demon possessions as reported in the Bible were actually instances of a person being possessed by a demonic being—an evil spirit or devil—or whether some of the reported instances may not have been some sort of mental illness or pathology. The ancients did not have any conception of psychology or the inner workings of the mind. And some of the symptoms of demon possession recorded in the Bible correspond remarkably well to our current understanding of some forms of mental illness. So was the Gerasene demoniac actually possessed by demons or did he suffer from what we would now refer to as some form of mental illness? We can't say for sure.

Since we do not generally encounter demonic possession in our own time, application of today's Gospel reading to our own lives has little meaning. But it is certainly applicable if we apply a broader definition—one that includes our own understanding of "inner demons." "Inner demons" in reference to something that one personally struggles with in their own mind. From this perspective, whatever the "demon" is generally has led one to believe that they need to hide a part of themselves, to cover it up, so as to seem "normal." And truth be told, most of us probably do have something about ourselves that we would consider an "inner demon," whether that is a diagnosable condition, or merely some other aspect of ourselves we would rather not see the light of day—that we would rather others not be privy to.

Just as in the case of the Gerasene demoniac, those of us with "demons" likewise may feel that our personal "inner demons" leave us vulnerable, naked, and exposed. Feeling, fearing, that everyone can see our "demons." Feeling that we are unable to restrain our "demons," we may seek to withdraw, to hide at least a part of ourselves from others, living in the shadows in a tomb of our own making, feeling as if a part of ourselves are dead. Or wishing that some part of us were as dead.

When considering potential “inner demons,” the list is as individual and unique as we are. There are those who suffer from diagnosed mental illness. Then there are those who suffer from addiction. Those who are in abusive relationships. Those suffering the effects of past abuses. Those who feel ashamed or unworthy because of something they have done or something that has been done to them by others. Those who have been, or feel like they have been, rejected because they do not conform to the expectations of others or the identities imposed by others. Those who feel abandoned or alone. Those haunted, even tortured, by memories. Those who have self-doubt. Those who have low self-esteem, feeling that they have little or no value. Those who experience self-loathing, even self-hatred. Those who have hidden impulses or motives. Those who contemplate behavior that is harmful to self or others. Whatever causes one enough concern to want to keep it buried and out of the light of day, out of the public eye. Such are the “demons” that we may possess, or rather, that may possess us. That stand in the way of us living into the fullness of who we are meant to be.

As we saw in the Gospel reading, Jesus crossed physical, cultural, and religious boundaries, so as to boldly encounter the Gerasene demoniac. When the demons were named, “Legion,” he was able to drive them out, bringing healing and wholeness. So that ultimately the man was found “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.” The man is then able to return to his own community. So too, when we are willing to approach Jesus—or allow him to approach us, to cross the barriers that we put up, he dares to meet us where we are, even in the tombs of our own making in which we have imprisoned ourselves. As he approaches, and we are able to name our demons, Our Lord accepts us for who we are, bestows his love upon us, and begins the work of driving those demons out. In his love, we are healed, as Jesus takes us by the hand and leads us out of our personal tomb and fully restores us to the community of which we are a part. Jesus offers love, a word of acceptance and assurance that we are all God’s children, that we belong, that we are worthy of God’s love and care. That we are worthy of the love and care of our community.

Jesus comes to challenge and drive out those things that have power over us. Those things that stand between us and others. Those things that stand between us and him. Those things that stand in the way of the health and wholeness God desires for all his beloved children. Those things that prevent us from living into the fullness of who God calls us and creates us to be—those who are created in the image and likeness of God. Like the Gerasene demoniac, we need to recognize just who Jesus is for us, that he is in our midst, to be willing to step out of our self-imposed tomb, and allow him to lead us into a new life of wholeness. One in which we are recognized for who we truly are: beloved of God.