

Sunday, June 19, 2022
Second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 7 (Year C)

Luke 8.26-39

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/750102486339845>

(Sermon begins at about 22:35)

“Casting Out Demons”

At first glance, our Gospel reading for today may seem to be a bit archaic. A bit irrelevant to life in the 21st century. I mean, demons? Really? We don't generally think of people as being possessed by demons in our own day and age. Other than in “The Exorcist” and similar movies. Indicating that, in our time, demons have been relegated to the realm of pure entertainment. But is that really a fair assessment? If we really look around, aren't there people in our own time who could be considered demon-possessed? Aren't there conditions or situations which could be considered demonic? And no, I am not talking about your inconsiderate neighbor who plays loud music at two in the morning or that political figure you love to hate. I'm talking demonic in the true sense of the word. As implied in our Gospel account of the Gerasene demoniac.

Perhaps it would help to step back into the mindset of the ancients. For Luke and other Scripture writers, for the disciples, and for the general populace in ancient times, the world was filled with demons. Demon possession was not an uncommon occurrence. Not that the streets were filled with demon-possessed individuals. But there are certainly enough instances of demon possessions and of Jesus casting out demons in the Gospels that it was obviously a thing. Something that was not particularly surprising to the original hearers of these stories.

Now, does that mean that evil spirits were more active in ancient times than today? Not necessarily. But one thing is certain. The ancients were not as sophisticated in their understanding of the natural world. They took a more simplistic approach to cause and effect. Generally speaking, good things were caused by God, and bad things were generally caused by evil forces, by demons, who were thought to be the minions of the devil. Looking back at the description of some of the conditions that were attributed to demons, such as in today's Gospel reading, we could provide a plausible, alternative explanation based on our more advanced understanding of the world.

Our Gospel account tells us that the man Jesus encounters did not live in a house but rather in a tomb. He had not worn clothes for a long time. He was prone to shouting and possibly other violent actions. He thought that others, namely Jesus, were sent to torment him. When asked his name, he responded “Legion,” indicating that he seemed to have multiple identities or voices informing who he viewed himself to be. So, in a nutshell, a homeless man who had multiple personalities, was paranoid, did not follow normal social conventions like wearing clothes, and was subject to violent outbursts. Today, we would say the man clearly suffered from some form of mental illness, which likely resulted in his homelessness. But the ancients did not have the understanding of the human mind and psyche that we do today. They did not

understand mental health in the same way we do. So, who's to say which is the correct diagnosis? Was the man possessed by demons or was he mentally ill? Or is there even really a fundamental difference?

I always tell my Bible Study group that we cannot be so quick to try to explain the events in Scripture based on our own 21st century perspective. But today's Gospel is a case where, perhaps we need to, if not completely dismiss the account of demons in favor of a diagnosis of mental illness, at least blur the lines a little. To try to see how our modern understandings and interpretations might blend with the ancients' understanding of the demonic to provide a more robust understanding of what is happening. And of how our belief system plays a role in addressing the issues presented.

Perhaps the words of one commentator will help:

For Luke and his contemporaries, the world is riddled with demons who distort creation and overwhelm hearts and minds. Human beings are cast as porous creatures open to spiritual influences: Jesus himself is filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1), and many are possessed by unholy ones. On first glance, of course, this way of understanding the world can seem archaic and foreign. But on the contrary, any number of death-dealing forces today are often experienced as "possession" or being "caught up" in dynamics that exceed our intentions or control.¹

This actually fits in pretty well with the definition of "demonic." Demonic meaning "related to or suggestive of a demon."² And while one definition of "demon" is an evil spirit, another more modern usage of the term is as "a source or agent of evil, harm, distress, or ruin."³ We've already touched on how a condition such as mental illness could have been viewed as demonic by the ancients. And I think most of us would agree that many forms of mental illness, particularly the more serious and debilitating forms, could be described as demonic. We certainly hear that terminology used to describe vexing issues—often referring to such issues as a person's "demons." As that which causes harm, distress, even potential ruin.

At this point I feel that I should issue a disclaimer, recognizing that there may be some hearing this sermon who may struggle with mental health issues or have a loved one who does. Please know that my use of the term demonic as related to any psychological or psychiatric condition is not meant to be pejorative or dismissive, but rather an acknowledgment of the seriousness of such conditions and how difficult they can be for sufferers and their loved ones alike. Particularly when untreated. That such conditions are demonic in the sense of being harmful, distressing, or potentially ruinous to those so afflicted and to those they impact.

That said, while many forms of mental illness could be described as demonic, there are certainly a range of other situations—personal or societal—that could equally be categorized as demonic. As being harmful, distressing, and potentially resulting in ruin in one way or another. Our commentator continues: "Think of how addiction overwhelms individuals and families; how racism shape-shifts over time between explicit and implicit forms; how anger consumes; how envy devours; or how sexism creates pervasive cultures of degradation."⁴ And while we may or may not classify addiction or racism or anger or envy or sexism, or any other "ism" such as

ageism or heterosexism or classism as “demonic,” they all, on some level, are harmful and distressing, and potentially ruinous, to those dealing with or subjected to, these situations. Broadening the definition of what can be viewed as demonic. Not that these are necessarily reflected in the person of the Gerasene demoniac.

Yet, while our Gospel story deals with a man who is possessed by a demon and exhibits very specific characteristics as a result, the story actually provides a pretty accurate picture of what happens when any demonic condition is present; be it mental illness, addiction, racism, sexism, or any of a whole host of “isms.” What happened to the man as a result of being possessed? Aside from the specifics of his particular pathology, the most fundamental result was that the man was alienated from his community. The man was ostracized. Living isolated among the tombs away from the village. And because he was viewed to be a danger—either to himself or others—he was even bound in chains and shackles. All because he would have been considered perpetually unclean because of his condition.

To one degree or another, the many conditions—be they individual or collective—that we have categorized as being demonic ultimately result in a disruption of community. In some being isolated from community. Sometimes the isolation is self-imposed out of fear, shame, or a deluded sense of being better off without the broader community or a segment thereof. Sometimes the isolation is imposed from outside out of fear, shame, or a deluded sense being better off without the perceived offender; often rationalized as imposed for their own well-being. While the specifics are varied and nuanced, the results are the same. Separation. A disruption of communal life. Us vs. them.

This story is really meant to demonstrate “God’s power over death-dealing forces in our lives, no matter how invincible they may at first appear.”⁵ Regardless of the nature, be they our personal demons or our societal demons. This story is primarily about God’s power being manifest through the healing and liberation that Jesus brings about. Jesus was a stranger in this area. He could have continued on his way. Nobody was asking for his intervention. But instead, he saw a beloved child of God in need of healing, in need of liberation. He engages him one-on-one, in a personal way. He asks his name. He wants to get to know him. To hear his story. So that he is not viewed as some random, unknown individual, but is recognized and known as the person he is, worthy of dignity and respect. “The man begins unhoused, naked, isolated, shackled, living among the tombs . . . and out of his right mind. By the story’s end, he is welcomed, clothed, unchained, in his right mind, and sitting at Jesus’ feet. He goes from outcast to insider, pariah to apostle, without a home to feeling right at home.”⁶

We are all painfully aware of the many woes present in the world around us today. So much that we can—and at times do—rightly label as demonic. Jesus’ example in today’s Gospel shows us that when presented with such demons—be they mental illness, addiction, racism, sexism, or any of a whole host of “isms” and other conditions—rather than treat the situations and particularly the individuals involved as demons, we are to recognize them for who they are: beloved children of God. While the remedy or solution to specific situations do vary, the starting point is always the same. Be it in our one-on-one interactions or in societal interventions. Recognizing that they are not demons but beloved children who have somehow gotten lost. That in engaging them, hearing their story, treating them with dignity and respect

(even when to do so may be a challenge), we make a little space for God to enter in. In our openness to engage, we create space for God to begin to bring about healing. Healing of the other. And healing of our own perceptions and feelings about the one we face. Only then can true community have a hope of being restored.

¹ “Back to Life: SALT’s Commentary for Second Week after Pentecost,” SALT, June 13, 2022.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/6/18/the-beautiful-struggle-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-second-week-after-pentecost>.

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demonic>

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demon>

⁴ “Back to Life: SALT’s Commentary for Second Week after Pentecost.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.