

Second Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
19 June 2022

Luke 8:26-39

I just came back from Saint Francisville, Louisiana, where I preached at the funeral of a dear friend. And as I was visiting with old friends and walking the same old streets in which I spent 20% of my total life (11 years,) there were times when I felt outright uncomfortable and sad. Somehow, it was as though I was a stranger, and my home was no longer my home. I walked the same streets, but somehow they were no longer my streets. I reconnected with people I grew to love over the years, but somehow, I felt like an outsider in their unfolding narrative. It was like I was outside looking in. I was much removed from their pain, their dreams, and aspirations. When they spoke of their future, it wasn't I they saw as pastor, confidant, and guide. These particular sheep have another pastor, and I am no longer part of their unfolding narrative. Even though at some point in my life their stories had become part of my own story, their children like my children, and I was a firsthand witness of their courage and resilience, I no longer fit into the puzzle of their lives. I have become the former rector. The once-rector. The last guy. A visitor and a tourist, although in my heart I still wanted to be seen as a local, as one of them. This is the nature of ministry. Priests are transitory. We enter into people's lives, pour ourselves into relationships, and then we exit just as unceremoniously as we came in. We move away, leaving spaces we once inhabited to those who belong there by nature of their common history, profession, or sheer act of the will.

The Gospel of Luke today starts with the following sentence, *Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee*. This amazing sentence packs centuries of difference, suspicion, conflict, and strained relationships into a few words. "Opposite Galilee" means much more than a geographical descriptor. It is much more than saying, "On the other side of Louetta!" This is Jesus' first time in Gentile territory in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is in hostile territory, among a people he doesn't know, in a culture very different from his own. He is surrounded by strangers, and he himself is a stranger. He has crossed the boundaries into the unknown, and this story becomes the very first offering of salvation to the Gentiles in this Gospel.

We are told that, *"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."* This tomb-dweller had become a nuisance to his own people, a stranger, someone they recognize but of whom they were quite suspicious. Perhaps there was a time when he was a somebody, but now he is a nobody. He has even lost his personal identity. He no longer has a name, but calls himself a "legion." A Roman military legion was composed of 6,000 soldiers. This man feels as though there are 6,000 voices

competing for attention in his fractured mind. Now, he is just part of the scenery and a constant source of fear for those who know him and live near him. He is deranged, alone, one from whom people hide. For Jesus' disciples, this man was not just a Gentile, he was also unclean, demon-possessed, the very definition of what the word "different" means.

Although in the section before, at Chapter 8:25, the disciples "were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?'" in this section we see how the legion of demons recognize Jesus at once. He man cries out, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." Those who belonged to the inner circle still wonder who this Jesus might be, but the stranger, who happens to be at the very bottom of the social ladder in his community, recognizes Jesus immediately. In the section before, we see Jesus power to calm the raging seas. Here we see Jesus' power over the forces of evil, represented by this man's condition. In the next section, Jesus will show his power over death as he raises someone to life. Jesus is a powerful Messiah and even the evil spirits that have kept this man in chains all his life are able to recognize him. Isn't this a bit ironic and sad that those on the margins tend to have a more clear understanding of who Jesus is than those in the inner circle?

Perhaps we become so familiar with the stories of Jesus that we create a character in our minds, a double, a Jesus of legend and faith, and little by little we begin to forget the real Jesus. I find it so sad that many of us come to church week after week ready to meet the Jesus of religion, a Jesus encased in fixed faith statements and creeds, a Jesus who demands certain liturgical and pietistic actions from us. But today I challenge you to look deeper. Find the real Jesus behind our liturgical curtains. See the Jesus *Legion* saw today. A Jesus full of power over nature, over the forces of evil in our midst, over life and death. Find a Jesus who is the liberator. One who enters our status quo and upsets the waters of formalism and tradition. One who is here to create new life and wants to free us from whatever constraints and afflictions are keeping us chained to our past.

Theologian Richard Jensen challenges us to see in this demoniac an image of what afflicts our world today. He says, "*The story of the Gerasene demoniac should now be interpreted so that it speaks a word of assurance and hope to those for whom every day is a battle with depression, fear, anxiety, or compulsive behavior.* (Jensen, Richard. *Preaching Luke's Gospel*, 188.) I agree with Jensen, but I would go further. I would add to the list of mental illnesses our resentments and bitterness, our obsessive need to have things our way always, our intransigence, our tendency towards discrimination and even racism, our selfishness and apathy, our jealousy and envy, our helplessness and hopelessness, our greed, and our lack of faith. And I believe Jesus is the answer, whether the battle is depression, anxiety, and addiction, or whether the battle is evil and hatred. We are all tomb-dwellers, like this man was. And our tombs are self-chosen. We choose

lives filled with bitterness, rather than addressing the cause for our unhappiness. We rather distance ourselves from family and friends than challenge their abuse. We rather hold on to our jealousy of others more fortunate than ourselves than learn to be grateful for the abundance in our lives. We need to be liberated. We need our chains broken!

God has given us a world filled with resources to help people who are in great emotional pain. It is called medicine, counseling, prevention, political action, protection, etc. Having said this, I have seen Jesus bring great comfort to people suffering from mental health afflictions. I have also seen Jesus break the chains of pain and resentment that bind us to the status quo. I have seen the followers of Jesus bringing Jesus' love to the disenfranchised, lonely, and isolated. I have seen Jesus working through his followers to alleviate some of the most pressing issues in our world. Jesus is powerful and his followers can be powerful instruments in Jesus' hands. We who follow Jesus are called to be a force for God in a suffering world. We have a responsibility to love the world.

I find it very interesting that although this man produced much fear in his neighbors, the reaction of the people after Jesus' healing is not joy or even gratitude, but intense fear. "They asked Jesus to leave; for they were seized with great fear." Somehow, they had gotten so used to the sick man that they would rather keep things as they are than have this Jesus upset the status quo. We too get used to our own drama and our own disfunction. We let our pain define us and we are secretly terrified of what might happen if Jesus upsets the waters. Many of us are addicted to our own unhappiness. But if we let Jesus heal us, then we will be free from our bonds, free to be the people God created us to be. Michael Green in his book, *The Gospel of Luke*, states "We are willing to trade the freedom to grow and change for the security of knowing that things will be like they have always been." (p. 41.) In a way, this quote explains why I left Saint Francisville. I knew that to be the person and priest God wanted me to be I had to follow my wife's new job and new path. I had to leave the comfort of my status quo to open myself up to what God wanted from me.

As Jesus leaves, he tells the healed man, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." Mary Anderson (*Stay and Follow*, Christian Century, June 3-10, 1998,) says, "At the very end, we see what kind of story this really is. It isn't simply a story of one man's healing, but a story of one man's calling. Jesus does bid the man to follow, but in this case the following, the call to ministry, involves staying rather than leaving. Jesus does not reject the man's application for discipleship, but accepts it fully. I even have a first appointment all lined up for you, Jesus says from the boat. Your congregation is standing right behind you. No, go and tell my story." This is the same invitation for us today. Jesus wants to heal us, and then he wants to commission us to go into the world to tell his story. Each one of us have our healing stories, "Now, go, return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you!" Amen!