Jesus Heals the Gerasene Demoniac
John 8:26-39
2nd Sunday after Pentecost, Year C June 15, 2025
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Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship on this Second Sunday after Pentecost. We are now in the period of the church year called the Season after Pentecost or Ordinary Time. "Ordinary" doesn't mean that nothing is happening, since we celebrate Trinity Sunday, All Saints Day, and Christ the King Sunday during these months. What "ordinary" does mean is that we do not celebrate major events of Jesus' life, such as his birth, death, or resurrection. Nor do we celebrate the birth of the church on Pentecost. This season, which begins the day after Pentecost Sunday, continues until the day before the Advent begins, The longest season in the Christian year, it focuses on the church's mission and role in the world. During this season in Lectionary Year C, we will focus on the Gospel of Luke. We'll encounter numerous stories that will help us to grow in our faith, discipleship, and service. The color for the season is green, symbolizing growth.

The first story that we will explore concerns an ostracized man who Jesus released from the demons who possessed him. Although you are likely familiar with this story, it does sound very strange to modern ears. Before we delve into the story itself, let's set the stage.

This story follows on the heels of the one concerning Jesus calming a storm (8:22-25). For reasons unknown to the reader, Jesus and his disciples take an unplanned trip across the Sea of Galilee, heading to the north of Israel, to the east side of this lake that is 8 mile long by 13 miles wide. After his miraculous confrontation with a tumultuous storm, the boat and all of its passengers arrive safely "at the country of the Gerasenes" (8:26, *jer' a scenes*). The disciples may have been thrilled to reach dry land, but this was no place they wanted to be! They were now in Gentile territory for the first and only time in Luke's Gospel. By extension, the exorcism that Jesus performed was the only one he did on Gentile soil. This was definitely a scary situation.

Jesus encounters a truly unclean scene. He is in a cemetery, the place of the dead. Tombs are unclean. Moreover, there are pigs around, considered unclean by Jewish law. And the "welcoming party" is a a naked man who is clearly possessed by demons. Jesus wants to know the man's name, to which the demons respond, "Legion" (8:30), signifying that there are numerous evil spirits within this man. Jesus proved himself capable of controlling nature when he calmed the storm on the lake, but did he have power to release this man from the demons that tormented him? This was a task on a cosmic plane!

Yes, of course he was able! But an unusual request ensued after the demons left his body. They "begged Jesus to enter [the pigs]" (8:32) Jesus granted permission, and the possessed pigs rushed down the embankment and were drowned.

As we can imagine, the owners were quite upset to see their pigs—and their livelihood—die. We can understand why the owners would summon the townspeople to see what had happened. When the people arrive, they find the man who they knew to be possessed "sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind" (8:35). Just imagine how his once animal-like existence, controlled by evil forces, has been changed. In many respects, he is now unrecognizable. The townspeople were, as I think we can easily understand, "afraid" (8:35). I'm

not sure how I would have reacted, but I think the translation in the Revised Standard Version (RSV) would better express my feelings: “seized with great fear” (8:35). What has happened is beyond the scope of human understanding, so it’s no wonder that the people are terrified.

We see several different responses to Jesus’ exorcism in the text. Although there is no description of how the swineherds felt, we can only imagine that they are highly agitated and angered by the loss of their pigs. It would be bad enough to lose a few animals, but they lost their entire herd. We don’t know what they said to the folks they told, but we can imagine that they were not at all happy.

As we’ve said, the people who were called from the surrounding area by the herdsmen were afraid of Jesus. That’s certainly one reasonable response to having someone of a different faith who you do not know come in and demonstrate authority over cosmic affairs. They wanted Jesus to leave...now! Ancient peoples were afraid of powers they couldn’t explain, so their reaction is not surprising.

We don’t hear what the disciples have to say, but there’s one other respondent here—the man who was freed from the demons. He wanted to go with Jesus, to follow along the way. That’s certainly understandable. I would have wanted to stick close to Jesus myself. But he would not allow that. Instead, Jesus told him, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you” (8:35). Obediently, the man went and shared the good news of his deliverance throughout the city. We have no record of how this man, who was as good as dead and a social outcast, was received by his family and friends. But they must have been amazed...and perhaps fearful, too.

So far, as we read the story, it seems like one that is focused on healing from demon possession. And that’s true. But the way this story is constructed and the words that are chosen suggest that there are far deeper meanings. Episcopal Vicar Judith Jones points out these meanings this way in “Working Preacher” (June, 2019), and I quote:

> Until this point, the story sounds like a simple healing miracle. For people in the ancient Roman world, however, “Legion” had only one literal meaning: a unit of approximately six thousand Roman soldiers, the occupying army. Suddenly an exorcism takes on social and political significance, and Luke’s word choices throughout the story invite a closer look. When the man confronts Jesus, Luke uses a verb that he employs elsewhere of armies meeting in battle (Luke 14:31) when the demon “seizes” the man. That’s a verb used elsewhere when Christians are arrested and brought to trial (Acts 6:12; 19:29). The words for the hand and foot chains, for binding and guarding, are the same ones that Luke uses in Acts when the disciples are imprisoned. In short, the language of the whole episode evokes the experience of living under a brutal occupying power.
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> Furthermore, the region of Gerasene is the setting of a horrifying historical event. According to Josephus, during the late 60s AD, toward the end of the Jewish revolt, the Roman general Vespasian sent soldiers to retake Gerasa (*Jewish War,* IV,ix,1). The Romans killed a thousand young men, imprisoned their families, burned the city, and then attacked villages throughout the region. Many of those buried in Gerasene tombs had been slaughtered by Roman legions.
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> When the Legion occupying the demoniac encounters Jesus, it begs not to be consigned to the abyss. Rather surprisingly, Jesus permits Legion to enter into a

> herd of pigs instead. Jews regarded pigs as unclean, so this detail is a reminder that Jesus is in Gentile territory. It may well carry a more political meaning also. One of the emblems of Legio 10th Fretensis—used not only on banners but on everyday objects such as coins and bricks—was a pig. The 10th Fretensis participated in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, took the lead in reconquering Palestine, and was stationed in Jerusalem after the war. For the people of the area, pigs would have seemed a fitting destination for Legion. Here the story takes a darkly humorous turn, for Legion, thinking that it has avoided the abyss, promptly charges into the deep and drowns. (end of quotation)

I find this to be a great example of how the Bible can be politically subversive. When I use the word "political" here, I am not referring to any kind of partisan politics. You may recall that I've said on several occasions that Jesus is neither a Republican nor a Democrat, neither an independent nor a member of the Green Party, or any other party. Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He reigns in the kingdom of God, not in any earthly kingdom. Yes, there are human governments, but our ultimate authority, the one to whom we owe our allegiance, is God. And as we can see with the oppressive Romans, human government thrives on power, not servant leadership as Jesus would have it. If we want to see how the kingdom of God operates, we only have to look at the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7. Loving one's enemies and turning the other cheek may not be the order of the day in human governments, but it's how God's kingdom operates. And, as a Christian, I want to do my best to follow Jesus' teaching, not the ways of the world.

We've covered a lot of ground today, but where does our discussion leave us? Some of you may be questioning whether demons even exist. Perhaps we can all agree that evil exists in the world, no matter what we call it. And perhaps another thing that we can agree on is that some people are apparently bound by something that seems to control their life and prevents them from experiencing the shalom—the health and wholeness that God wills for all of us. Examples of this include addictions, such as alcohol, drugs, and gambling. You may have had such a binding experience yourself, or have someone dear to you who is currently battling an addiction and needs to overcome it.

That's one aspect of the story. Another may be that you or someone you love has already been freed and forgiven, but, unlike the formerly possessed man in today's story, you (or they) don't feel willing and/or able to share the good news of God's freeing love with someone else who needs to hear it. If the person in question is a friend or family member, do whatever you can to help this person open up to others about what God has done for them.

Another aspect of the story is the swineherds' loss of their livelihood and their telling others what happened to them. What do you expect people to do for you, even if something that may have seemed unjust at the time was really for the best? The townspeople couldn't start a Go-Fund-Me page to help you purchase more pigs for your business. What could they have done? What could people do for you today if you lost your means of employment, just as many federal workers in our country have?

Note in verse 6 of Luke 8 that Jesus' response to the people's request for him to leave was to get into the boat and return home. Jesus will help us in any way possible. I don't know what else he could have done for the townspeople, but it's clear that they wanted no part of him, and so he left.

To sum up, today's passage reminds us of Jesus' authority over evil, the power of faith, and the transformational impact that encountering Christ can have on our lives. Let's consider several possibilities.

First, where do you see Jesus opposing evil in your own life, or in the world? Are you convinced that he can overcome evil? Why or why not?

Second, do you believe that with faith all things are possible? If not, where do you draw boundaries? What might have to happen for you to expand those boundaries?

Third, have you personally experienced some kind of healing from an illness or addiction? If so, how did you feel when you realized that you were finally free of what bound you? Did you give glory to God? If not, whom did you thank?

Fourth, in what way(s) did God's healing impact you, not only physically but also spiritually?

Fifth, what evidence do you have that your experience transformed other people in addition to changing you? If you have not told them about how God worked in your life, do so at the first opportune time.

Your challenge this week is to think about how God has cared for you, especially when times were tough in your life. If you had been ostracized by family or friends, how did God restore your relationship? If you were freed from the grip of something you didn't want but couldn't control, did that (would that) affect your relationship with God and with those around you? Ponder these questions and, if you choose, write your response in a journal.

Love, Nan