

## Our Name is Legion

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Fourth Sunday After Pentecost - June 20, 2010 - (Father's Day)

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.*

My junior year in college, I worked as a resident advisor in a men's residence hall. It was a pretty good job that provided for me a free room and a stipend for work that basically involved telling people to turn down their stereos, reminding people that we were (supposedly) a dry campus when it came to alcohol, and enforcing what were called inter-dorm hours. What this meant was that all of our dormitories were either all-male or all-female. Members of the opposite sex were only allowed in dorm rooms between certain hours. If you were studying with a member of the opposite sex after a certain hour, you had to do so in the dorm's commons area and not in the rooms.

Late one night I was studying with a fraternity brother of mine in the lounge of the dorm where I worked when I looked down the hallway leading to the commons area and saw a male student with two female students in the dormitory area after the inter-dorm hours had ended. My real responsibility at this point was to go accost them, remind them that they were breaking established college rules, and then write them up for breaking the rules, something which carried penalties for the students if it happened enough.

The students saw me and they froze, staring at me with their mouths open, wondering what I would do next. However, for some reason I decided not to go chase them, confront them, and write them up. For some reason I decided to simply sit up in my chair, stare directly at them and hiss, "GET OUT."

And they got out. In a hurry. They ran out of the building and did not come back.

As I returned to my studies, I looked over at my fraternity brother who was looking at me as though this was the greatest display of power he had ever seen. Finally, he simply said to me, “Why would you even bother writing anyone up if you have that power. Get out! What power!”

In this morning’s text, Jesus sails to the region of the Gerasenes and is confronted by a man who is possessed by demons. This possession has resulted in behavior that has guaranteed his being ostracized from the rest of the community. He is demon possessed, which made him, under Jewish law, unclean. He lived in the tombs, which were considered so unclean that they were whitewashed so that no one would accidentally come into contact with them and defile him or herself. He lived alone. He lived near pigs, also considered unclean by the Jewish people. He was filled with so many demons that when Jesus asked him his name, all that he could say was, “Legion,” a military term which meant five or six thousand.

This text is a demonstration of the incredible power of Jesus. He has so much dominion, so much authority over these demons that they know him by name and beg for his mercy. They beg for Jesus to not cast them into the Abyss, which was believed to be the dwelling place of demons. They ask to go into the pigs instead, Jesus casts them there and they die.

This is a text that tells the story of an exorcism. We have a difficult time talking about exorcisms today. They sound too spooky. We envision floating beds and people whose heads turn all the way around when we think of exorcisms. The temptation for us is to simply attribute texts like this one to a primitive belief system. The temptation for us then is to regard this text as one whose relevance is limited to an ancient time and to ancient people and to ignore the power that this text has for us today.

People are possessed by demons today. The difference however, is that today our demons have learned how to not be identified as demons and instead be identified as something else. Our demons today may be medical issues, they may be psychological issues, they may be social issues, but they exist in us and until we face them, we find ourselves living outside the community that the gospel envisions. We find ourselves feeling cut off from the love of God or his covenant people the church. We don’t call them demons because they do not feel like demons. Our demons instead feel like C.S. Lewis’ Satan who managed the great trick of convincing the world he does not exist.

There are things in us that the ancients called demons that we call by different names like addiction, depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and epilepsy. I would argue that the association of mental illness with demon possession has served to stigmatize mental illness and discourage many from seeking treatment. However, we are more comfortable with these terms because we have so much faith in modern medicine’s ability to treat them.

The problem is that modern psychotherapy cannot explain away all of the demons which cause so much torment in our lives. Adolph Hitler did not order the genocide of six million Jews because he forgot to take his medication or because he never entered therapy. The butchery of Pol Pot, Joseph Stalin, Idi Amin, and Charles Taylor are no different. Evil is

alive and well and we fool ourselves if we believe otherwise. There are still demons which need to be cast out and there are still persons living in the solitary places, tormented and separated from the community of faith who still live in great need of the power of the living Christ.

Do we still believe that Christ as the power to cast out demons? Are we willing to let him?

The New Testament does not envision a faith devoid of self-examination. It does not envision a religion where we do not examine our own lives to see what it is in us that needs to be cast out. Instead, the gospel of Jesus Christ commands us to grow in grace, to leave behind that which hinders us from being the people Christ died for us to be. The good news testifies to the need for us to admit that we are not islands unto ourselves and that we need the grace of God to shed the skin of that which separates us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is the will of God for you and I to have new life, new hope, new peace, a new home with God, without the legion inside us that tells us that we are no good, that we are unlovable, that we are not made in the image of the living God. God seeks to emancipate us from our addictions, our obsessions, our mental slavery, our misguided priorities, our doubts, and the sins of the past. We are not fooling Jesus. We cannot put on a face to fool our God and the good news is that through love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus, our Lord looks deep inside of us and sees all of that mess and all of that junk and all of those things that you and I have learned to live with because they seem too big for us to handle and we have just quit trying and Jesus, the Son, the righteousness, and the power of God looks inside of our naked selves at those things and he says, "GET OUT."

And sisters and brothers, all God asks of us is to open the door and wave goodbye. All God asks of us is to meet him at the lakeshore and ask him to help us live in a new way. All God asks of us is to put on our clothes and go and tell how much God has done for us.

At Annual Conference one year, our bishop was Joe E. Pennel, Jr. When preached his final sermon before the Conference session at the service of Ordination, Consecration, and Licensing, he told a story about making appointments to churches. One year, he had met with the Staff-Parrish Relations Committee in a church in this conference who was planning on receiving a new pastor that year. As he met with that committee, a member of that church looked him in the eye and said to him as he pounded his fists on the table, "Don't you dare send us a woman! I don't care if you send us the most inept, incompetent man in the Conference. But don't you even think of sending us a woman to pastor this church!"

Bishop Pennel sent them a woman.

A year or so later, the Bishop preached in that same church. After the service that same man approached him and with tears in his eyes as he took both of the Bishop's hands in his and he said, "Thank you for sending us this pastor. She is truly a wonderful and remarkable pastor and we are so thankful for her."

We all have things that possess us. We all have things in our lives that cause us some level of torment. It may be a mistake made in the past that follows us around, even today. It

may be an addiction, big or small, of which we just cannot let go. It may be an old grudge, an old wound, and old enemy, something that still lives inside of you, something that you might let go of if only you could, something that stands between you and the abundant life of God. It may be something that you don't understand. It may be something that none of us can ever, in this life understand. It may be a necessary change in your life that you are afraid to make, because you wonder what will happen if you are wrong, that God may leave you on your own, as if God ever does.

You may feel damaged. You may feel broken. You may feel like that between you and the life God is calling you to have and live that there is a wall you cannot scale. You may feel like your life cannot be anything else than it is today. You may feel like they are not demons at all, but remember that when the Lord of life asked the demons their name they said "Legion! For there are many of us!" And just as our Lord, the one who was more powerful than religion, more powerful than culture, more powerful than the chains, the whip, the cross, and the grave, spoke to the demons by name he looks at all those things in your life and my life that separate us from God, from one another, and from his body on earth, and he calls them by name and he says, "GET OUT!"

Sisters and brothers, that is the power of the living Christ. That is a story of the Holy Spirit at work. And that is the story of a man who met Jesus at the lakeshore and had his demon cast out. That power to be recreated and to live a new way is available to us today, regardless of who we are, regardless of where we are, regardless of what we have been and regardless of what is going on inside of our hearts today; our God comes to the lakeshore, to the cubicle, the classroom, the bedroom, the office, the back yard, and wherever else God's children are found in need of liberation from the oppression from the demons we face, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, he tells them to get out. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, they do.

What power. What power indeed.

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO.