

## Sermon for June 23, 2013

### Fifth Sunday of Pentecost, Luke 8:26-39

BLESSINGS TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD THE FATHER, OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

When I was doing my **first** unit of chaplaincy at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange County one of the wards that I was assigned to was the Behavior Health unit. To be assigned to that unit for me was a **real stretch** as within the confines of that place in the hospital were the people who were being held for up to **72** hours because they were either a threat to themselves or to society as a whole.

To **enter** into this unit you had to be **buzzed** in at the door by a nurse. As soon as you entered the unit you had to go **directly** to the nurse's station and sign in. To get **into** the nurses' station you had to punch in a code on a key pad to open the door. Once inside you were behind a thick sheet of glass which in **itself** was rather daunting.

**Many** of the patients in this unit were being watched because of their **threat** of suicide, **withdrawals** from drugs of various kinds, and they were people who for **one reason or another** could no longer cope with life because of a **variety** of factors. Some people were **roaming** the halls; some people were **strapped** to their beds; some people were **yelling** at the top of their lungs to imaginary people. This was all **very unnerving** for me—a person who does not even watch scary movies

for fear of nightmares. But for **many** of these people their life **was** the nightmare that they faced **each and every** day.

**One** thing that I did notice during my time with some of these people who would request a chaplain's visit is that in **many** cases they had an **eerie** sense of **clarity** about what was going on **inside** of them and **within** their lives. Unlike a good number of the other **medical** patients I saw in that hospital the people that I ministered to in the Behavior Health unit had **one** thing in common and that was that they **wanted** to talk to a chaplain about God because for **many** of them their lives—and the **demons** which tormented them—had turned into something **unrecognizable** and something they were **unable** to cope with. They were **searching** for something to hold on to—and **God** was what they wanted to talk about. God's promises to us are those things which can get us through the **challenging** times when life closes in around us. **That** was what they wanted to hear more about.

In our **gospel** reading for this morning we meet a man—one who lives in a country opposite of Galilee—in more ways than one. A man who was **possessed** by demons, who was **exposed**—**naked**, a man who lived **among the dead** in the darkness of the caves and tombs, a man who **no longer knew** who he was because when Jesus asked him his name he said he was called '**Legion**'. A man who was **possessed** by a *legion, literally thousands*, of **demons** who favored the darkness

and despised the light; yet, when this man **saw** Jesus he also had an eerie sense of clarity because the **demons** which lived inside of him knew **exactly** who Jesus was. The man yelled out to him in a loud voice, **“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”**

Let us take a step back for a moment as this story follows the pattern **consistent** in stories of the exorcism of demons. There is the **naming**, the **engagement**, the **expelling**, and the **description** of the one freed.

First the **powers/demons** must be named—in the case of our gospel story it was ‘*Legion*’ but that which has power over us in our lives can be known by **many** names: drugs, anxiety, alcohol, gambling, shopping, lying, cheating, fearfulness, or abusive behavior. When I would ask the people in the Behavioral Health unit what they thought had **power** over them the answers included many of these.

In our reading for today in the **engagement** portion of the exorcism the demons begin to **ask favors** of Jesus. The **bartering** had begun. Do not send us back to the abyss and darkness let us enter the herd of swine feeding on the hill. Jesus agreed. An **addict** will barter as well. Trading is done for the sake of the addiction so life can go on one more day. When my **son** stopped drinking and started going to AA he began to smoke more heavily. I **asked** him why he thought he did that. He **told** me he could not give up all of his addictions at once. He had to hold on to something. The **engagement** continued.

In today's story the **swine** represented the **expelling** of the demons from the man. The demons thought they had **caught** Jesus when he **agreed** to let them go into the swine. They thought they were free. They thought they had **outwitted** Jesus **escaping** to do battle some other day perhaps. Yet, as they **plunged** into the sea, they **neglected** to realize that the **power** which Jesus possesses is power which even the **sea** obeys.

When the people of the community came out to see what had happened they were seized with great fear. Because you see, change often time brings with it fear—even good change can be a time when fear will set in. That is what happened in this story. **Yes**, they had a **violent** man in their community. For some of us—**yes** the home situation is abusive, **yes** the alcoholic does get drunk and becomes belligerent, but **this**—for better or for worse—has become the known. No matter who we are we are wise to **not** underestimate the power of the **known** or the power of the **status quo** in our lives. Changing the **order** of things will **always** be perceived as a **threat** at some level. That is why the people wanted Jesus to **leave**—he posed a **threat** to their status quo and **life** as they knew it. The community of the Gerasenes were **not willing** to make that change. They wanted the change master gone. So Jesus left.

Exorcism is a **cleansing** of the mind. We do not always wish to have our minds **cleansed**, our understandings **questioned**, or our position or place **challenged**.

**That** is why the people of the community were **not** ecstatic about what Jesus did.

It is as though they were saying, “The system is working fine, thank you. It may not be perfect, but we have found a way to manage, so please leave us alone.”

Maybe that was true for the community but it was surely not true for the man who was possessed by **thousands** of demons.

**Legion** was searching for an answer. **Jesus** was the answer for him. And here we have the **description of the one freed**. When the people came to see what had happened they **found** the man from whom the demons had gone—no longer was he referred to as Legion—he was sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind. The **power of God** over the demons and the evil forces had **triumphed**. Jesus had **restored** the man to life. It is any **wonder** that he begged Jesus to let him go with him. He was **saved**. Once Jesus freed the man from the demons he was **restored** physically and spiritually to his full humanity, to a place in the community where he could now return to his home, and proclaim what God/Jesus had done for him.

To believe in the story of the man possessed and exorcised is to believe that we all have choices. Choices about what we **accept**, choices about what we **believe**, choices about **how we act**, and choices about **what we think is possible** for us in this world. Choices to name our own personal demons as well because **each** of us

have them. Choices to believe that **shackles and chains, realized or not**, in *any* form are something which can bind us all.

The **good news** in all of this, much like the people I ministered to in the Behavioral Health unit, is to **know** where to turn in times of trial. It is to **know** where the **true power** in this world lies. Our God is **more powerful** than anything this world can throw at us. Our God is **more powerful** than any **addiction**, any **abusive behavior**, any **fear or anxiety, anything**. **Jesus** is the one who sets us free from the powers of this world. We are no longer captives, we are free to go out and tell the good news of this truth to the world.

Our hymn of the day, which we will be singing in a moment, was first published in **1529** by Martin Luther—a man who **himself** often felt pursued and tormented by his own personal demons. Luther believed in demons but he believed in God's power more. Luther's **confidence** was centered on being **claimed and loved** by God. A **claim and love** that we all share. So now when we sing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" please pay **special** attention to the words that **Luther** wrote knowing that he too, like Legion and we today who live in our world, was **plagued** by demons that would **not** let him go. **God was and is** the answer because as Luther writes, "the kingdom's ours forever." **AMEN.**