

SCRIPTURE

Luke 8:26–39

Jesus Heals the Gerasene Demoniac

26 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27 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. 28 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” — 29 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.) 30 Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. 31 They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

32 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. 33 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.

34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35 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. 36 Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 37 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. 38 The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 “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.

MESSAGE – We are Legion

I suspect that this story about Legion is a little hard for most of us to relate to. In this modern world many people have a hard time with the idea of demons or possession. It seems like superstition to us; a vestigial idea from a more primitive age.

Nowadays we speak of mental illness, chemical imbalances in the brain; we sanitize the spirits and reduce pathologies into Latin descriptors as though that somehow explains them. We are tempted to look at the man called Legion and declare that he suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder; what we used to refer to as schizophrenia. These days we would drug Legion, not cast demons out of him.

Whichever way we choose to describe Legion’s condition – possession or illness – it still seems as though it is not a story about us. It’s an outlier – an extreme situation that has no bearing on our day to day lives.

Except that it’s not. As I was writing this sermon I met Legion.

Wednesday morning I was writing and as it approached lunchtime I realized that I had brought nothing so I decided to run across to Food Basics to pick up some cheese and crackers. As I walked past the library I heard someone yelling from inside the doorway, but didn't pay much attention to it; downtown is full of people who are not in their right minds and I had a sermon to write.

That was a good Samaritan moment, and I was not the Samaritan in the story. It bothered me that I had not stopped to see what was the matter, that I had heard someone who was obviously suffering deeply and chose to ignore them, so I returned to the library to investigate.

I didn't see anything happening inside, but as I exited into Simcoe Square I encountered a man leaning on his bike, crying, and screaming into his phone. He was greatly agitated; out of control.

Throughout our encounter he could not pull himself away from the phone. Even though there was nobody on the other end he was unable to take his eyes off the screen – throughout the twenty minutes or so that we were together he never made eye contact with me. Could not disengage himself from the very thing that was introducing such grief and despair into his life.

Not an hour later a strung out woman came into the church. Like the previous man, she too was completely out of control; tweaking, twitching, unable to be still. Her mind mimicked her body; restless, agitated, wandering in fits and starts. Like the man she was also unable to let go of the very thing that was crushing her; the drugs possessed her.

Both of these people were like Legion – not in control of themselves, shunned and rejected by those around them, living on the fringes, in the tombs, neither fully alive nor fully dead. There is no other way to describe them than possessed. They were not their own, they were owned and controlled by something else.

Maybe it's not little devils in their heads, but certainly they were under the influence of something that controlled them, enslaved them, and forced them to do things that no normal person would.

Still we may think that we are exempt from the story; we're neither drug addicts nor unhinged people. Legion doesn't describe us. I challenge that idea.

The people that I met today had demons, they were possessed by spirits of addiction, and mental illness. I'm sure there were plenty of other problems, but each of them presented with one major spirit that was obviously ruining them.

The man that Jesus encountered did not have a single demon, but a multitude. He described himself as Legion. A Roman Legion consisted of 6000 soldiers. So when Jesus asked the man his name and he responded by saying Legion, he was essentially saying that the demons within him were too numerous to count.

There were so many influences within him that the man no longer had an identity of his own. He wasn't John, or Jacob, or Stephen – he was merely a mass of conflicting urges and desires – each part

at war with the other so that he no longer knew who he was. He became completely defined by that which robbed him of his joy and health, those things that kept him bound, and prevented him from experiencing life in its abundance.

He was physically strong enough to break the chains that the townspeople put on him, but could not break the bonds of the demons themselves. He was living among the tombs, dead to any real sense of living.

It seems like an extreme case, but I wonder if many of us aren't all that different. Don't we also tend to define ourselves in terms of our deficiencies and setbacks, our disappointments and failures? Not always, of course, but enough to rob us of the abundant life God hopes that we experience and share.

Why is it that every time we want to take a risk, try something new, reach out to a stranger, or do anything that might make us vulnerable – and let's be clear, to do anything great or even worthwhile we make ourselves vulnerable, we expose ourselves to the risk of failure or rejection – why is it that whenever we want to take a risk we are reminded of every failure, every disappointment, every setback that we've experienced before?

I think many of us have voices in our heads that constantly barrage us with negative thoughts about ourselves. The voices tell us we are not good enough, not strong enough, not smart enough – we don't deserve the good life, we are not worthy. These are voices of fear and failure.

This is the voice that I listened to when I first ignored the man at the library. It was not my problem, what do I know about helping people, they guy's out of control – do I think I can hold my own if he starts swinging at me? Fear and failure made me ignore him the first time by. How often do we let opportunities slip by for exactly those reasons?

Maybe we're not so different from the man among the tombs. Maybe we too have a host of voices in our heads that prevent us from the full and abundant living that we are created for. Maybe we, too, are Legion, wandering somewhere between life and death.

Along with the thoughts that appear in our heads, we live in a culture that constantly bombards us with thoughts that encourage our sense of lack or failure.

Think of almost any ad that appears online, on tv, or in print. They all begin with the premise that there is something wrong with us. We are too fat, not beautiful enough, not trendy enough, don't love the environment enough, don't raise our kids well enough, we can't keep our floors clean, or our cat box from stinking.

The basic pattern for ads is to begin by describing a problem that only their product will be able to fix – and most of the time the problem is us, or if not us directly is at least is attributable to us. The essential message is that there is something wrong with us or something that we are missing. The goal is to create within us a powerful feeling of insecurity.

We buy the products because we believe the promise that the product makes, but before we believe that a product will make us more beautiful we first have to believe the underlying premise that we are not already beautiful as we are.

We unconsciously accept the faults and failures that the advertising industry aims at us, and they add to the other voices in our heads that run us down and try to convince us that we have no place living in society, that we should be outcast. Maybe we hold things together better on the outside than some others, but inside we hear those voices of doubt, of condemnation. We too, are Legion.

So what are we going to do about this? What did Jesus do with Legion?

Jesus recognized that the problem the man had was one of identity. The man no longer even had a name - his identity had become lost amid the legion of demons that inhabited him. The demons were all the false claims and lies about who the man was – all those things that confused and confounded the man.

So Jesus banished the demons. He cast out the lies about who the man was; Jesus restored his true identity – that of a beloved creation of God, the identity that had been lost in the man's fall into darkness.

Jesus does the same for all of us.

You are not bound by the voices of culture or of your self. When we listen to those voices that tear us down then we live out an identity that is a lie, that is contrary to the way that God sees you.

Though once we all were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we walked, following the voice of the prince of this world, we have been set free. If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.

The new identity is actually the old identity – it is the original identity that God created you with before all the other voices intruded.

It is the identity announced at your baptism when you were washed with water, marked with the cross of Christ, and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Your identity is bound up in the identity of Christ, given to him at his baptism.

Your identity is simply this – given by the word of God - 'You are my child, the one I love. In you I delight and in you I am well pleased.'

Be free from whatever demons plague you. They are illusion – smoke and mirrors. Your true self is a heavenly creation, intensely beautiful and so precious to the one who made you.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.