

Sermon: Luke 8:26-39 (Proper 7C)
Christ Church Riverdale, 20 June 2010
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Luke 8:26 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, * which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As 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. ²⁸When 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'— ²⁹for 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.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³²Now 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. ³³Then 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. ³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵Then 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. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then 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. ³⁸The 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. (NRSV)

It's strange to our modern sensibilities to hear about a man who understands himself to be possessed by thousands of demons and an exorcism that sends a herd of pigs rushing down the bank to drown in the Sea of Galilee. This gospel is strange to our modern sensibilities, and yet the scriptures are considered holy in large part precisely because they speak not just to one age, but across the ages. The scriptures speak to us in our situation best when we look at them first on their own terms, in the context of their own situation. We wonder what "really" happened to the man who in our society would be diagnosed with particular kinds of mental illness. But at the time people assumed, they experienced, that this was a healing. The spectacular nature of the healing made them afraid but they didn't question or deny the healing itself. With our modern sensibilities we would also question why the pigs needed to drown, and take away the livelihood of the swineherds. But for Jews pigs are unclean animals and in that time and place would be comparable to a bunch of rats for us New Yorkers.

To me what speaks across the ages from this gospel story, set in the first century in what is now Syria, is how people can be afraid of healing--can even resist it--both as individuals and as a community. We don't know how the man came to suffer from demons, but we can see the results: He's broken out of every effort to subdue him; he goes around naked, which would cause people to keep their distance so as not to encounter shame. He lives not in a house but among the tombs--an area people would stay away from because tombs were ritually impure. Tucked within the man's address is the heart of the matter: He did not live in a house--not meaning a particular type of building, but that he didn't live in a household, a family. Group identity and belonging were everything in first-century Mediterranean culture, and if you weren't part of a family or other group, you were nobody. You might as well be dead.

Here the man is, kneeling before Jesus and shouting at the top of his lungs, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God. I beg you, do not torment me!" *Hey, big shot, leave me alone! Don't heal me; don't change this situation I hate but have gotten used to nonetheless.* And yet the man comes to Jesus, instead of hiding. Sometimes we see that kind of mixed message--people protest, "Leave me alone," but in a way that attracts attention: "Hey, over here--leave me alone!" *"I said, leave me alone!"*

All the while Jesus is commanding this affliction to leave the man. "What is your name?" Jesus asks. *Legion.* "Regiment," we'd say today, a military unit made up of thousands of troops. The demons beg Jesus not to order them to go back into the abyss. "Don't make me change!" even if it is a matter of healing, of life and death. Now we would expect the swineherds to be upset to see all their pigs drown; they run and tell the town. But we read that when the people come out, they see the man clothed and in his right mind, *and are afraid.* They thought they knew this guy, but not any more! If we're not careful, our experiences can calcify into "facts"--assuming that certain people are "always" a certain way. Even it's for the good, change can be frightening. When the townspeople hear the eyewitness reports of how the man was healed, it gets worse: "Then all the people of the surrounding country asked Jesus to leave them; *for they were seized with great fear.*"

As individuals and in groups we can be every bit as resistant to healing as the man in the story, every bit as fearful as the townspeople. *Leave me alone; I can quit any time I want!* Or maybe my suffering or pain or affliction has become so important to my identity that I wouldn't know who I am if I were healed. When it comes to positive change in someone else, we can all too easily say, "Oh I know her; she'll never change!" This is especially true with those closest to us--the people we think we know the best. We can be suspicious of any evidence of change, just waiting for it to be exposed as false. Or think about situations of chronic violence in our world. A consensus for peace can develop on both sides, but a few people more committed to violence than peace can derail the whole process with just one bombing or shooting.

Transformation does take place in individual lives, and in places like Northern Ireland, where ten years ago it would have been difficult to imagine how little violence there now is. But transformation is scary, so how do we open ourselves to it? First, we take ourselves to the place of healing, even if it means going kicking and screaming. We host Alcoholics Anonymous meetings here five days a week. The only requirement for membership in AA is the *desire* to stop drinking. You don't have to have stopped and gotten yourself all together beforehand. Second we need to be honest. Our physicians don't have a good chance to help us get better if we don't give them full information about our history and condition. When Jesus asked the demon's name, the man didn't say, "What demon?" but "Legion," fully admitting the size of the problem. Third, we need to reserve judgment, to be ready for new possibilities, even when all evidence seems to be to the contrary.

The man Jesus healed wants to stick around and become one of his followers, but Jesus tells him to go back home. Be reincorporated into your household, renew your relationship with your family--*get a life!* This man was given his life, as are we, by the God who specializes in new possibilities!