

I had a choice today – talk about John the Baptist or the Gerasene demoniac. This story is in the gospels of Matthew and Mark also, but it only comes up once every 3 years in our assigned readings, and I just could not pass up the opportunity to talk about deviled ham!

Today's reading of the gospel of Luke opens with Jesus and his disciples arriving in Gerasene – Gentile territory – the other side. Their trip across the sea has not been uneventful, however. They are *arriving* after Jesus stills the stormy seas that threatened to sink their boat and panicked the disciples. Jesus stilled the raging storms of the outside world and now he is confronted with the demons of a man whose world is chaos and turmoil. This man is unwelcome, aggressive, naked, harmful.

As soon as Jesus gets one foot on dry land, this is the man that is in front of him, falling at his feet, with demons that beg Jesus. "Leave us alone – stop bothering us," they say. Luke gives us many details emphasizing how possessed by these demons the man was – guards, chains and shackles could not keep the man from bizarre behavior.

What's striking to me is that– though the demons were strong – they had control of him - something brings the man right to Jesus. Those demons were not strong enough to keep the man hidden among the tombs and away from the living Christ. And we are told that Jesus has ordered them to come out of the man.

The demons *know* Jesus – they know who he is, they know or feel his power over them. Surely whatever power Jesus had was like a magnet and drew the demons forward. Surely the power of Jesus saw through all those demons; saw through the evil, the convulsions, the bizarre behavior; Surely Jesus' power connected with the health and wholeness God intended for all people and brought the man to him. Jesus reaches for the long-unseen health and wholeness of this man– that part in each of us that wants to be reunited and in harmony with our Creator – and drives the demons out.

This is good news for anyone who has felt less than able to be the person God calls us to be. This is good news for anyone who has

felt taken hold of by demons. This is a story that gives us courage to stand before Jesus with our demons – be they guilt, shame, fear, loneliness, depression, voices, violence, possession or perhaps shyness, low self-esteem, addiction, dependence on others, prejudice.

This is a story that gives us courage to stand before Jesus even as our demons rule our lives. This is a story that gives us confidence that Jesus reaches for and brings us to healing. This is a story of Jesus, the very power of God stronger than the demons that possess us.

The man's demons are cunning, they are cunning even in their desperation – they beg Jesus not to send them back to the abyss – the bottomless pit where demons were sent so they could no longer affect and rule human beings. Why Jesus doesn't just finish them off, we don't know – it might have been because pigs were considered unclean by the Jewish people. But he grants their request to enter the pigs. The demons are too much for the pigs who race into the sea and drown. The bystanders rush to tell the townspeople, who rush out and find the exorcised man clothed, calm, content at Jesus feet.

But guess what - Nobody likes a good exorcism! – You'd think the people of this town would rejoice that this man would no longer haunt them. You'd think that they might even thank Jesus for removing this legion-sized, demon-possessed man from their lives. But, instead of a thank you, they ask him to beat a hasty retreat. Whatever it is Jesus is offering – they don't want it.¹

Why is that? Because exorcism hurts! It is loss. Healing by exorcism is hard, painful and often means loss – even when that loss is a part of us that we wish we didn't have, but don't know how to operate without. At the beginning of the story the man cries out – “do not torment me”. The demons and the man cling to each other as though they are one, and, maybe by this point they are – the man doesn't know how to act without the demons. The man could not

¹ Rev. Todd Donatelli; sermon for June 24, 2001

envision what it could be like to be healed. He didn't know what it would be like for himself, or among the people of Gerasene.

Healing often brings upset of all those around us, those that we interact with. He could not imagine remaining with those who only knew him as demon-possessed and could see no alternative.

Exorcism hurts for the people of Gerasene, too. Although the gospel story is about demons and a world that seems removed from ours today, these were people and a society like ours. They lived as an organized group of people with customs, rituals, taboos, gods, occupations, – occupations like that of the swineherders – all of these things kept the community functioning. And, life was lived every day according to this system that kept some order in the world. Sometimes you chafe at the system, sometimes you resent it, but on the whole, people are contented because it works – people are fed, clothed, sustained. There are rules of appropriate behavior, and anyone who falls outside these parameters is cast out. There is good and evil and the powers of evil - the people believe - rest within the demoniac. Evil is present but it is known.

Today we would say that evil doesn't settle only in people. Our institutional demons in society today are homelessness, prejudice, unequal opportunities, corruption.

Congregational demons today are “we've always done it that way”; “remember when”; lack of vision or holding on to activities, ministries that no longer nurture and sustain, or help us to serve God to the best of our abilities.

With the demoniac the seat of evil, people didn't have to deal with their own demons. People could project their own demons onto the other. They ostracized the demon-possessed man because they were also possessed – by a spirit of self interest. “Don't' bother us” the man's demons pleaded. They didn't have to deal with the powers of death ruling their own lives because there, among the tombs was evil.

So, Jesus comes along and upsets the balance of the Gerasene community. He weighs in on the side of life and mercy.

Unsure of the parameters in this new setting, the people are afraid – “they were seized with great fear”. They were jolted out of their comfort zone. Even though Jesus used this power for good – the Gerasene people wanted to cast Jesus out – “don’t bother us. Don’t set anybody free. Don’t expose us as the self-centered people that we are”. We’re like that too, but the good news is that Jesus comes through the storm sets ashore on our territory, recognizes and responds to our need for healing.

Personal and institutional demons keep us living among the tombs. What is it that brings us out of the tombs? What is it that brings new life?

It is the power of God to bring good to our lives. That exorcises our demons – personally and institutionally. That stays with us through the scary and painful healings we will go through.

What is it that brings us out of the tombs? What is it that brings new life?

It is staying involved with our lives, our cities, the world – staying alert for the demons of our day

One day at a time, people overcome depression, addictions, abuse by God’s grace in their lives – and demons are sent back to the abyss where they have no hold, no rule over human lives.

Thousands of homeless and needy people ministered to and with through CFLS over the years – First Trinity and friends – helping send demons back to the abyss.

100 members of Lutheran Volunteer Corps in direct service and advocacy work confronting injustice across the United States – people of God sending demons back to the abyss.

At the congregational dinner and meeting last night we had a bit of discussion around the Lutheran Confessions – the writings and tenets from the 16th century that the Lutheran Church follows – and, if you don’t know about these, don’t worry, we’re going to have a class

on them! We were reminded in this discussion that basically these have remained unchanged, except not so long ago when the church added to the Lutheran Confessions our opposition to the system of apartheid. The Lutheran Church helping to send demons back to the abyss where they have no power, no rule over humans.

Go and tell what God has done for you.
Amen.