

“PIGS AND DEMONS”

Luke 8:26-39

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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A strange, foreign country; a shadowy graveyard; a naked crazy man chained to the tombs. All we need is a vampire and this would be the setting for a blockbuster summer movie or the latest Stephen King novel. But this is no movie. This place of anguish and fear is where we find Jesus. He and his disciples have crossed the water and are in the land of the Gentiles, the Gerasenes.

The welcome delegation is a man possessed by demons; not just one demon but too many to count. He is so out of control he can't even keep his clothes on so his neighbors have tied him up in the cemetery. He has been cast out of the community and he is alone- well, except for the multitude of demons that have taken control of his body, mind, and spirit. As soon as this man meets Jesus the demons cry out his identity.

“What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Do not torment me!”

Can you imagine that? Jesus is on foreign soil, the land of the non-Jews, and a demon knows his true identity. His own people, the Jews, couldn't pick him out of a line-up, but the demons know him by name. And they know enough to fear him. “What are you going to do to me Jesus, Son of God?” That wasn't just a random question. The demons knew their very existence was at stake with the arrival of a power even greater than the power of evil they represented.

This poor man was possessed not by one demon but by a legion, one translation uses the word “mob.” A legion of Roman soldiers was 6,000 strong so you can get an idea of what this man was up against. He was as good as dead, living among the tombs, kicked out of his community because he was so out of control. The people were afraid of him- with good reason. He was no longer welcome in his own hometown. They did what they could to contain him, they shackled him to the tombs but even the chains couldn't hold him for long.

He was practically no longer human, he had lost his identity. His life was nothing but terror and madness. And he was powerless to do anything about it. But then Jesus showed up. The possessed man didn't know who he was but the demons sure did. They beg Jesus three times: do not torment us, do not send us back into the abyss, and finally, send us into the swine. So Jesus obliges, the demons rush out of the man, into a nearby herd of pigs, the pigs run wild and go off a cliff and into the sea. Everyone at that time knew that demons cannot survive in water so not only was the man liberated, the demons were destroyed. Unfortunately, so were the pigs.

Healing. Transformation. Wholeness. You would think there would be a great celebration among the community but only the healed man is grateful. Everyone else wants Jesus gone. Healing this man upset the equilibrium of the community. When the man was crazy they knew how to handle him- with guards and shackles- but now that he is at peace everything has changed. Add to that the lost income for those who owned the pigs and maybe we shouldn't be surprised that the locals begged Jesus to leave town.

When the man was ill it was very clear who was in and who was out. His neighbors knew where evil lived, they all had his address. But now they had no scapegoat. They had no one to personify evil. They didn't know what it looked like anymore. They are afraid and fear often makes us angry. They are afraid of the one who has power over even the power of evil. They are afraid of the one who changed everything by healing the local crazy man. They couldn't get rid of the demons but they could at least try to control them. They could manage the possessed man but they cannot manage Jesus. They cannot control him and they are so afraid they beg him to get into his boat and go back to wherever he came from. They couldn't see past their own fear and loss to see the great power of transformation and healing Jesus could have given to them as well.

Often we find Jesus healing someone, giving them the gift of transformation and wholeness and those who are not transformed watch with suspicion and fear. Maybe we prefer the demons we know to the change we don't; even when that change comes from God. Obviously these people valued their pigs more than they valued the sanity of their neighbor.

This section of Luke gives us four stories of the awesome power of God expressed through Jesus. On their way across the lake a great storm blows up and the disciples are terrified. Jesus calms the storm and then his own disciples are afraid of him. Following the healing of the demoniac, Jesus heals the bleeding woman and raises the dead daughter of Jairus. After that he commissions the disciples to go forth to heal and preach.

In each of these healing stories Jesus doesn't just give the person their health or sanity, he gives them salvation. He brings life to their mind, body, and spirit. He brings them back into relationship with their family and their community. The salvation of Jesus is holistic- it includes all parts of our lives.

The local people came to the cemetery expecting to see the naked crazy man and what they found was a new man who looked a bit like the old one except he was clothed and sitting at the feet of Jesus, "in his right mind." Some might say the man was "back to normal." But I would suggest that the healed man will never be "normal" again. How can he? He was as good as dead and now he is alive in a brand new way. The man is better than normal. He has been healed by the awesome power of God. He looked into the compassionate eyes of Jesus, heard the authority in his voice and found himself healed and whole and filled with the love of Jesus. Instead of the voices of demons pouring out of his mouth he now speaks the word of God.

He was healed and ready to serve. He begged Jesus to take him along, he wanted to be with this miracle worker, he had a story to tell and he wanted to tell it at Jesus' side. But Jesus had other plans for this man. "Go home," Jesus said, "Go home and tell everyone what God has done for you." I can't blame this guy for wanting to go with Jesus. After all, what did he have left in that place? His community had kicked him out. I doubt his family was waiting for him at home. So of course he wanted to go with Jesus, the one person who came to him without fear and drove the demons away.

Sending the man back home was also a message to the Gerasenes. If the man were to leave they could just forget about him and go about their lives. But with him

constantly among them, healed and renewed in mind, body, and spirit, they couldn't ignore the power of God. All this guy had to do to preach an eloquent sermon was walk down the street. His mere presence spoke volumes to his own people in a way that no other evangelist could. He was the first disciple of Jesus to be sent to the Gentiles.

You can be sure that when Jesus shows up everything is going to change. For some it will be a welcome change, for others it will not be welcome and will be met with fear and anger. Jesus comes with abundant possibilities- but those possibilities usually mean something has to change and we don't always want to change.

Although we don't talk much about demon possession these days many of us are possessed by other things: drugs, work, alcohol, religion, sex, food. Some of us are possessed by suspicion, resentment, envy, anger, insecurity, bitterness, greed, pride, or fear. We struggle with demons we cannot even name, physical or emotional pain that keeps us awake at night. Some struggle with broken relationships and others seem to thrive on breaking them.

If this story tells us one thing it is this: no one is beyond the reach of Jesus' healing touch. No one. Not you. Not me. Not the crazy man chained to the tombstones in a foreign country. And not the people who chained him there. Jesus walks right past our fear and our anger. He touches us with healing and wholeness that will turn our world upside down. He takes the chaos within us and sends it to the depths of the sea. He offers to share God's extravagant, abundant love with us.

It is often true of us that we want everything to get better, but nothing to change. We can't have it both ways. And Jesus offers us the better way.

No one is beyond the healing touch of Jesus.

No one.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.