

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge June 23, 2019

Pentecost 2

Galatians 3:27-29

Luke 8:26-39

It's a strange story, isn't it? This story of a man possessed by a demon who he calls "Legion". A man so wild and unhinged that he would regularly break the chains that tried to hold him and run away to live among the tombs, about as dark and scary a place as his inner life must have been. Homeless and naked. Alone and abandoned. Nothing to live for. Filled with despair.

Yes, as grim as this story is, it's not one that's unfamiliar to us, is it? We probably also know someone or maybe more than one, who's struggling with the darkness and despair of mental illness. Maybe we're struggling with that darkness and despair ourselves. Or maybe we've crossed to the other side of the street to avoid that person in ragged clothes who's shambling down the street muttering incoherently or walking with great determination and talking in a loud voice to someone or some thing that only he can see. You know what I'm talking about.

And we know something about homelessness here at St. Thomas. In just a couple of weeks we'll be welcoming 40 of our brothers from CFH who will live with us for the month of July. For the 24th consecutive year, we'll have the opportunity to share a meal, be in conversation, provide compassion and support to our brothers who know all too well what it means to "live in the tombs."

And we know something about what it might be like to be "possessed by a demon", don't we? Beyond paranoid schizophrenia or deep clinical depression, demons like alcohol or drugs or sexual obsessions or gambling addictions can be by the name of "Legion." Even those anxieties and insecurities and neurotic fears that keep us up at night or hold us back from relationships or rob us from savoring everyday joys of life. For some of us, those demons might be named "Legion" too.

So, if we expand our view of the demonic and our view of what it might mean to "live in the tombs", this strange story becomes a little more familiar, doesn't it? So, let's return to the story with this broader view in mind.

The story really begins before his episode. Jesus has decided to cross the lake, the Sea of Galilee as it's known. And it's important to know that in making that journey, Jesus and his friends were crossing from Jewish territory to Gentile's territory. Crossing into foreign turf with foreign customs and foreign practices. And it's important to know that another strange event happens along the way. A storm comes up and threatens to swamp the little boat carrying Jesus and his friends. Jesus strangely, is sleeping through all of this until he's awakened by his frightened friends. Once he awakes Jesus speaks into the storm and the winds and the raging waves, and they ceased and were calm. Jesus turns to his friends and says, 'Don't you trust me?' And they're amazed and afraid and say among themselves, "who is this guy? He speaks into the winds and the seas and they do what he tells them?"

And so, they arrive at Gerasene – the other side – Gentile country - only to be confronted by a storm of another kind. A wild man possessed by a demon who identifies itself as “legion”.

Now here’s a bit of context that Luke’s original audience would have known. Gerasene had been the scene of a brutal massacre of a group of Jewish Revolutionaries along with the surrounding villages by an occupying Roman legion. A legion consisting of 6000 Roman soldiers. The exorcism of the demons occupying the demoniac would have suggested a link to the evil acts of the Roman occupiers. And the great irony of the story – which would undoubtedly would have been a source of amusement to Luke’s audience – is that the “Legion” occupying the man preferred pigs – and pigs were ritually unclean and considered nasty by observant Jews. So now we see Jesus calming the storm that was raging inside the poor man. By speaking a word into that interior storm, Jesus frees the man from possession and returns him to himself.

So, you see Jesus goes to great lengths. He crosses the raging sea to confront another kind of raging storm, a demon called “Legion”, and to liberate a single, solitary soul from pain and torment and rejection and despair. Apparently, that’s the only reason Jesus makes this perilous journey. To heal and save and liberate a simple, solitary soul.

And my dear sisters and brothers, here’s the great news. The amazing news. The life saving news. Jesus is still doing it. Jesus is still going to great lengths, making perilous journeys, entering foreign territory, crossing all boundaries of race and gender and class to meet us – simple, solitary souls - in the middle of our own tombs.

The Apostle Paul recognized this boundary-crossing Christ was at the heart of the new world that Paul saw unfolding. He tells the community in Galilee “there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for you all are obliterated in Christ. And in Christ, we are all me. Even the ones whose demons can sometimes feel overwhelming.

And here’s one more thing. Sometimes the way Jesus calls out the demons, sometimes the way Jesus liberates us from our own empty tombs is to call us to do the same for someone else. To call us to reach out to another single, solitary, suffering soul and invite her or him out of darkness and into the light. One of the great paradoxes of the spiritual life is that it’s exactly when we feel lost in our own tombs or possessed by our own demons that the way forward is to serve someone else. The way forward may be to die to the medicated self, the obsessive self, the power and control hungry self, the anxious, worried, self-absorbed self, and instead offer our truest and deepest selves to another. Inviting them to join we both leave the tombs.

The beautiful prayer of St. Francis captures this in the most profound way. I’ll share it with you now:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon; Where there is discord, union; Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

