

Sermon for 6-23-19
Gospel -- Luke 8:26-39
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Who is this man?

Who is this strange, frightening shell of a man? A Gerasene, not a Jew; he cannot possibly have heard of Jesus, the upstart rabbi from across the sea. And yet he meets Jesus at the shore. Jesus steps off the boat, onto this foreign territory, and there he appears -- this man who must have looked more like a shadow or a phantom than a living, breathing human.

He is naked (which was just as improper in those days as it is in ours). He is filthy, covered in dirt and dust. Matted hair, dirt under his fingernails, wild eyes darting around. He is unable to look the Nazarene directly in his eyes. Nor should he, because this Nazarene is a Jewish man, a spiritual teacher, one who is revered by his followers for being pure and holy.

This Nazarene is a man of God, and Gerasa is no place for him. Gerasa is full of Gentiles, people who know nothing of the God of Israel, the Eternal Creator and Father of All. Luke tells us that Gerasa is "opposite Galilee," and it's also the opposite *of* Galilee.¹ Here they eat the flesh of pigs, the ultimate unclean animals. Here they accommodate the Roman occupiers; they serve and flatter Caesar's mighty army of thieves and scoundrels, oppressors who deny Yahweh and instead worship only their leader in his gilded tower back in Rome.

Jesus should not be here, in this enemy territory. And yet -- *it's part of the reason we love Jesus, isn't it?* -- enemy territory is exactly where he goes. There he encounters this dirty, naked, unclean man -- a man whose life and whose spirit are so hopeless, so broken, that he lives in the tombs among the dead. He smells of rotting corpses.

We love our zombie movies and TV shows (I know there are some Walking Dead fans in this congregation). This man, this Gerasene, is far closer to **dead** than anyone who has ever walked the face of this earth.

If Jesus were to behave according the rules and expectations of his society, he would turn away. He would avoid contact with this man at all costs. He would step right back onto that boat and surround himself with people who are clean and righteous and proper -- people who are just like him. But again -- *it's part of the reason we love Jesus, isn't it?* -- he doesn't turn away. Jesus does not turn away from suffering and isolation and despair. Jesus turns towards it, Jesus looks it in the eye, Jesus asks its name.

Now we come to the demons. The man, the Gerasene, has no reason to know about Jesus; in fact it's highly unlikely that anyone in this Gentile area would have heard of Jesus. Jesus has never traveled outside of Palestine as an adult. He has no reputation here. This Gerasene man does not recognize Jesus of Nazareth... but his demons do.

"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!"ⁱⁱⁱ

The demons know Jesus -- and not just his name. The demons know who and what Jesus is.

These demons are the forces that have all but destroyed the Gerasene man. These demons are powerful, powerful enough to isolate him, to strip him of all dignity, to make him the ultimate outcast. He's the walking dead, and these demons are so powerful that no one from his former life (family, friends, neighbors, colleagues) -- none of them is willing to acknowledge his existence. These demons have turned a human being, a child of God, into a poisonous ghost.

But even demons this powerful, forces bent on death and destruction, are no match for the Son of the Most High God. The armies of evil are washed away, destroyed, by the loving and liberating power of God in Jesus Christ.

That's Good News. The arrival of Jesus of Nazareth, with his teachings and his healing powers, is Good News to the Gerasene man, and to all others living as the walking dead, without hope or dignity or peace.

But the story doesn't end there.

"The 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." *Restoration. Liberation. New life.* "And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. **Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.**"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, is this where we find ourselves in this story?

Most of us here are not footsoldiers in an evil legion; we're not trying to oppress or destroy anyone. Nor are we the walking dead, possessed by demons that strip us of our hope and our dignity. We're the others. We're the ones who fear change. We're the ones who may kvetch and complain about the powers that be but really, at the end of the day, the status quo suits us just fine. We're the ones who are so invested in the dominant systems, the hierarchies, the powers and principalities of this world that liberation for the oppressed and restoration for the suffering sounds scary to us.

These neighbors and bystanders, the ones who asked Jesus to leave -- they're not bad people. They don't hate Jesus, or the man he's liberated. Maybe they even felt pity for him in his possessed state. But they know what liberation is. They know what Jesus aims to do. They've learned to live under occupation, and make do with relative freedom and relative wholeness. They know that if Jesus stays, if he spreads his message and his power in their land, things will change. Their lives will never be the same. And they are so very afraid.

I have a friend, a Methodist pastor in Tennessee, who has found herself at the center of a very unpleasant lawsuit. Her little church is located just a few blocks from the local hospital, and last year, church members began exploring how they might be able to address the problem of homelessness and hospital re-admissions. People experiencing a health crisis go into the hospital, lose their jobs (if they had jobs in the first place), have nowhere safe to stay when they're released from the hospital, and inevitably fall into another health crisis and end up readmitted. It's a vicious cycle. So the folks at my friend's church decided to build four "tiny houses" on the church's property, where people who've been discharged from the hospital can stay rent-free for up to 90 days while they work to get back on their feet. The hospital's social workers make referrals, and it's a great way of keeping folks off the streets and giving them a little boost during their recuperation.

The only problem is the neighbors. This little Methodist church is in a nice neighborhood; and the people living in that nice neighborhood don't want "*those people*" staying nearby. If "*those people*" are allowed to live in the church's tiny houses for 30 or 60 or 90 days while they seek more permanent accommodations, the neighborhood will change. Property values will go down. The neighbors will have to see "*those people*" when they walk down the street and drive to work or school. In fact, "*those people*" will become their new neighbors -- temporary neighbors, yes, but still neighbors.

So the neighbors are suing this church, and my friend, the pastor, to prevent the church from housing "*those people*" on its own private property. They're not evil people, these neighbors; they're not violent or hateful. They don't really want "*those people*" to suffer, but they'd rather let "*those people*" suffer (and possibly die) than change the way things are. Just like the locals in today's Gospel story, they are "seized with great fear."^{iv} And the truth is, if Jesus showed up in their neighborhood today and started feeding and healing and teaching "*those people*," they'd chase him right out of town.

Where are we in this story? What is its call to us?

How can we avoid becoming like these crowds -- so afraid of change, so content with the way things are that we'd rather let people suffer than do anything differently?

How can we remind ourselves that other people's restoration and liberation and wholeness is more important than our own comfort?

How can we keep our priorities straight in a world that encourages us to either ignore injustice or accept it as the way things are?

We can start by being brave. Just a bit of courage, not a lot -- just enough to look beyond our own preferences, our own comfort, and see the reality of other people's pain. We can make a vow, before God and each other, that we will no longer fear change. We won't dig in our heels and in so doing hinder another person's liberation. We can celebrate new life, and wholeness, and restoration even (and perhaps especially) when it looks or sounds different from what we've always known. And we can move closer, and listen, when "*those people*" speak. We can honor everyone's voice, and celebrate with all those who "declare how much God has done for [them]."^v

It may not sound like much, but it's a start -- and sometimes that's enough. Amen.

ⁱ Luke 8:26

ⁱⁱ Luke 8:28

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 8:35-37

^{iv} Luke 8:37

^v Luke 8:39