

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 12
June 20, 2010

Isaiah 65:1-9
Psalm 22:19-28
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

During a Vaudeville performance, Olga was tied spread eagle to a circular piece of wood that would spin around and around. She was unable to move, which was probably a good thing. Because while she was spinning, her partner threw knives and hatchets at the rotating board missing her by only inches.

But all of a sudden, during the act, Olga started screaming and fainted. The audience of course suspected the worst. Later, in her dressing room, when she had been revived, a reporter asked her what happened.

Olga said, “While I was spinning around, I suddenly felt something crawling on my leg and discovered that it was a spider. Oh, I am so afraid of spiders!” Certainly, we all have our individual fears.

Or there is the story told that in the days of the Roman coliseum, a young Christian was thrown into the arena where a hungry lion was waiting.

When the lion pounced on the man, instead of defending himself, the man whispered something into the lion’s ear. Immediately the lion jumped back and wouldn’t go near the man.

The emperor watching from the stands was amazed. He ordered that the young man be brought to him. He asked the Christian; “What was it that you whispered into the Lion’s ear that made it refuse to even go near you?” The man responded, “I said to the lion, ‘After dinner, you will be required to say a few words.’”

Again, we all have fears. But it does seem that sometimes we fear the wrong things.

In our Gospel story today, Jesus encounters a man who is possessed by demons. The man has been naked and homeless for years. He lives in the cemetery. He shouts at Jesus, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”.

Sounds like some kind of horror movie that makes you want to hide your head under the covers. But notice; this is not what frightens the people.

When Jesus asks his name, there is this dramatic moment when the demon-possessed man says, “Legion,” because there are so many demons in him. But again, this is not what frightens the people.

Finally, Jesus casts out the demons. He then allows them to enter into a herd of pigs. The pigs go wild, run off a cliff into the water, and drown. What a strange image this is. And yet this also does not frighten the people.

So do you know what did frighten the people? Luke writes; “When they came to Jesus (after all of this had happened), they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus’ feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.” Amazing!

Evidently, the people in Jesus’ day were accustomed to seeing people possessed by demons. For they understood evil to be a real presence that could inhabit not only people, but animals too. What they were not accustomed to was someone having the power and authority to cast out those demons.

You see, the temptation for us, who live according to a modernistic worldview, is that we believe that we can explain evil away. Therefore, we have no need for someone who can cast out that evil.

We read this story and we say, “Obviously this man was psychotic. They just didn’t know about things like dissociative identity disorder, a bipolar condition, Schizophrenic episodes, anti-social personality disorders or a diagnosis of being oppositionally defiant.

If only someone would have had some psychotropic drugs, they could have easily taken care of the situation without Jesus. After all, it was probably this man’s psychotic rampage that scared the pigs in the first place and made them run into the sea.”

You see, the fact is; we want to place this man into a category that we can understand. That way we won’t be so afraid. If we understand why this man is acting in such a manor, maybe our fears will fade away. For we fear the things that we don’t understand.

Perhaps we think; could something like this happen to me? Do I have any demons in my life? If so, what are they, and how can I recognize them? And finally, how do I get rid of them?

First of all, we must realize that the demonic reflects what God is not. The demonic therefore fights against what God wants for creation. And, since we are fallen creatures, we all have demons in our lives. Maybe we don’t run around cemeteries naked screaming obscenities. But we do act in ways that prevent us from being who God created us to be.

Let me give a few examples: I believe that the demon of greed has possessed our society with fury. It can be manifested in what is called “materialism.” We are told over and over again that we are what we own. We are defined by what we wear, what we drive, where we live, where we travel to, how our children are dressed.

Therefore, as a result, we have families alienated in the crush to accumulate. We fly through life working more and more hours to keep up with the demand for more and more stuff.

And even though we complain about it, and probably agree that it is a form of evil, the thought of changing our lifestyle and living differently is frightening. It is something that scares us. Do you know why? Because it has become our identity. It is who we are.

When confronted about it, we become angry, pointing to those who have more, somehow justifying our consumption. We see it as a personal attack for just trying to better our lives.

However, because Jesus loves us, Jesus is ready and waiting to cast out the demon of greed. For Jesus says, "I, and only I, am the way and the truth and the life. Therefore, place your lives totally in my hands." But I think that many of us are afraid to do so. We like the evil of greed as long as we can keep it under control.

There is also the demon of intolerance. The demon that makes us feel that we are better than those who are different from us. It is often times accompanied by pride or even hatred.

Recently there was a story written by a man telling about his life growing up in a culture where it was important to be like everyone else, especially as a teenager. He writes; "There was one member of my class that was different. His name was Tony. And he quickly became the brunt of jokes and bullying.

I was one of those doing the joking and the bullying. I would punch him and call him names. I would put him down out of fear of being seen as "soft" on him by my buddies. I actually felt dirty by how I treated Tony. I could see the pain in his eyes. But it did not make me stop. This continued for years while Tony was withdrawing further and further away.

Some time later, Tony wasn't seen for a few days and was found by his father hanging from a tree. They found his suicide note that had fallen down behind the desk. In it he spoke of how he did not choose to be the way he was, and how he could not bear the pain any longer.

You see, Tony, a gift from God, was forced to live in a hell contrived by others simply because he was gay. Many times, people created by God, loved by God, chosen through the waters of Baptism by God, are made to feel unacceptable, unloved, and abandoned, simply because they are perceived to be different.

However, because Jesus loves us, Jesus is ready and waiting to cast out the demon of pride and intolerance that lives in all of us. Jesus is saying; "I died for all people, period. Who are we to say that there are those who are unworthy." But again, like the Gerasenes, we fear the things that we don't understand.

Others live in our community under the demonic possession of abusive relationships – people caught in the trap of being told that they are worthless. They are led to believe that they have no value except to the degree that they satisfy the twisted needs of the abuser. Some will say; you must stay in a relationship no matter what.

And we keep the chains and shackles in place. For to confront the abuse takes unbelievable courage by the one being abused. And it is often easier to endure the abuse than to confront it. It is a silent evil that goes on behind closed doors in every neighborhood.

However, because Jesus loves us, he is ready and willing to cast out the demon of abusive behavior. And he is also willing to provide healing to those who have been abused, by assuring them that they are indeed God's creation. Truly, they are worthy of love and respect.

You see, Jesus puts his finger on many forms of the demonic that possess each of us. And he is bringing about healing and forgiveness, when we allow it to happen.

Jesus also asks us to be channels of those words of healing and forgiveness to those around us. Indeed, we are called to be Jesus, to each other, bringing the Good News to those caught up in their own form of possession.

Therefore, as we are encouraged to choose faith over fear, we can then encourage others in their struggles, and contribute to their healing.

In our story today, the man healed by Jesus begged Jesus to allow him to be a follower. But Jesus had another mission in mind for him. Jesus said to him; “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Perhaps that is our call too?

However, many times, we feel that we need to be perfect in order to help anyone else. We think that if we still have some demons in our own lives, that we have no right to try and help others. But that is not the case.

For just as Jesus dared to be seen with the “wrong” people in the “wrong” places at the “wrong” times, we too are called to dare to do the same. We do it because we know what it is like to be set free from demons, even if we continue to struggle in certain areas of our lives.

For we are a part of a movement called the people of Jesus. A movement of liberation to those who are bound. We carry the Good News that Jesus, is even now, at this moment, breaking the bonds of the demonic powers that wish to hold us.

We gather as people defiantly acclaiming that Jesus can still the storm, walk over the deep, raise the dead, and liberate the possessed. We gather to hear the words, receive the sacraments that give us the authority to speak to those around us who are possessed, that they will receive the healing that they need.

Then they too, will become the people God created them to be, and we will also. And then the forces of evil are destroyed. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.

In a few weeks, our country will celebrate a holiday. Do any of you know what that holiday is? Let me give you a hint; FIREWORKS.

What is it that we celebrate on the 4th of July? *Independence Day. We celebrate our freedom as Americans in the United States.*

So what does it mean to be free? *Can do whatever you want. No one telling you what to say or do. Make your own decisions.*

In our Bible story today, there was a man who was not free in a different way. He was possessed by demons.

These demons were controlling this man's life. They were making him run around naked acting wild and crazy. They were making him do and say bad things. But Jesus saw him and loved him. Jesus wanted to make this man free from these demons. So Jesus healed him. He told the demons to leave that man.

Did you know that we need to be healed by Jesus too? We need Jesus to help us to do and say good things. We need Jesus to help us to love each other. We need Jesus to show us how to care for each other.

This is what Jesus does for us so that we can be free. We can be free to speak out against the demons in the world and share Jesus' love with all people.

Let us pray... Dear Lord, you are the true healer. Help us in our struggle against the demons in our lives. Help us to live lives that are pleasing to you. Amen.