

Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Let us continue our worship together in prayer: Nurturing Lord, open our ears to what you would have us hear and our eyes to the new things you are doing in our midst, so that we might see you at work in and through us. If these words are not your Word, may they be forgotten and come to naught, but if they be Thy Word, may they adhere to our hearts, forever transforming us from glory into glory, into the creatures you would have us be, though who art our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Luke 8:26-39 (NRSV)

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As (Jesus) stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me'—for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?'

He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

Then 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. 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.

So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

The Word of the Lord...

It is true that in mainstream, Presbyterian culture there is not too much discussion about demon possession. Devil's food cake is about as close as we get. There are certainly some parallels we could make to mental illness. Having been a chaplain intern at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital I certainly have my share of stories about the tragedy of brain disorders. I witnessed the absurd, the hysterical and the frightening. Every patient there had a folder where I could look up their disorders to find out what was driving them to be and do and say what they did.

I often wish I had folders on some of you.

I like this story.

I like the vividness and the detail.

I like that the moment the boat hit the shore in a land the disciples could not have been too happy about visiting in the first place, they were met by *a man of the city who had demons*. I wish the text took the time to glance back at the boat to tell us which one of the disciples hid at the back of the boat (Thomas? Judas?) and who bravely (foolishly?) stayed where the action was (Peter, definitely Peter).

It had already been a rough journey in their young ministry together. They have traveled to the land of the demoniac by way of boat and have had a very shaking experience. While they were sailing a storm came upon them and according to Scripture almost swamped the boat. You remember where Jesus was during this? Was he bailing the boat, fixing the sail, navigation? Uh, no, he was sleeping. He is nowhere to be found as the boat is being besieged by water and wind and finally the disciples go down to yell him awake, "Do you not care that we are perishing?!"

Jesus gets up, yells at the wind and the waves which immediately turn calm and then asks them where their faith is. They are stunned by this man who commands even the wind and the waves (Luke 8:22ff).

They have to still be in some stage of stunned when they reach shore and are immediately confronted by an incredibly shocking and frightening sight. Scripture tells us that they are confronted by a man who has not worn clothes in a while and lives in the tombs by the water. Iw. The guy was strong too – the city is scared of him and has put him in chains and put a guard on him, yet he has broken those chains and escaped the guard to go hide in solitary places. I am assuming moonlit walks on the beach with a loved one were out of the question in this little town. So the storm-weary disciples watch, we can only assume, as this lunatic approaches Jesus, calling him the Son of the most High God. And then they watch as Jesus calmly asks him his name? "Legion," he replies which is the word used for five to six thousand soldiers.

They watch as the demons barter with Jesus, "Don't send us into the abyss, send us into those pigs instead." Jesus agrees and the disciples and the townspeople watch as the demons enter into the pigs and cause them to run into the lake and drown.

Then some time passes. Time enough for the witnesses of this event to run into town to tell others and for all of them to come back, time for the man from whom the demons had gone out to get himself dressed and be hanging out at the feet of Jesus... just chatting.

What I find interesting is that from all appearances it seems as though this town has been held hostage by the Gerasene Demoniac. Remember, he was bound in chains with a guard watching him. He ranted around the tombs naked and often escaped his chains and they would have to go find him. Yet Scripture tells us that when they showed up to find the man clothed, calm, and in his right mind – THEN they were afraid.

It mentions their fear twice. The second time it is mentioned along with their request for Jesus to leave. I guess they preferred the fear of the known rather than being confronted with this new power.

They had seen a power at work that was beyond their control. Perhaps they were living comfortable lives, and were happy. They see in Jesus someone who will change all this, someone who will make them uncomfortable, who will challenge the status quo. They see His power, and they cannot control him -- so they ask him to leave.

In C.S. Lewis' Narnian Chronicles, Aslan the lion is the picture of Jesus. In several places, Narnians quote the proverb, "Aslan is not a tame lion." I think that is the idea here. The Gerasenes are afraid of Jesus, because he is not tame. He is not like a genie from a bottle who will grant your three wishes. He is out of control.

Even when it is good, power that cannot be calculated or managed is frightening.

I hope we let this power issue convict us a little. We are a people of ritual. We like things just as they are and prefer not to shake things up. Disagree? Fine... Just one thing then, how many weeks in a row have you sat in that specific pew? One of you even counts back from the front to make sure that you get the right pew. I am not judging. Lord knows I sit in the same chair most every Sunday.

I am merely suggesting this as an example of how much we like routine. And why do we like routine? - Because it gives us a false sense of security and control.

In a seminary missions class, Herbert Jackson told how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that would not start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years.

Ill health forced the Jackson family to leave, and a new missionary came to that station. When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, "Why, Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life. For two

years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting that power to work.

He paraphrases Ephesians 1:19-20, "*How tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God.*" When we make firm our connection with God, his life and power flow through us.

One of the assumptions made is that the reason why the people were scared and sent Jesus away is because their valuable economic property – the herd of swine - was sent into the lake to drown.

An old sermon illustration tells of a child who was raising a frightful cry because he had shoved his hand into the opening of a very expensive Chinese vase and then could not pull it out again. Parents and neighbors tugged with might and main on the child's arm, with the poor creature howling out loud all the while. Finally there was nothing left to do but to break the beautiful, expensive vase. And then as the mournful heap of shards lay there, it became clear why the child had been so hopelessly stuck. His little fist grasped a paltry penny which he spied in the bottom of the vase and which he, in his childish ignorance, would not let go.

As we – this community of God – walk through our faith journey are we holding on fast to paltry pennies or are our hands open to serve the world? What do we value - the man's soul or the herd of pigs?

My values become skewed too. My work in the ministry has confronted me with people in genuine need and those who I felt were working the system. As pastor, with some resources available to me, it is often up to me to determine on which side someone asking for help falls on. This process often pushes me to a dangerous cynicism. But if you volunteer at New Hope Ministries or Downtown Daily Bread or Project SHARE you will receive many genuine thanksgivings for the ministry we are helping to provide.

"This has really helped out my family in a tough time."

"You people are so wonderful."

All for doing what God has called us to do – share our resources.

Our power, our gifts, our blessings come from above. So should our values.

Some of you may have noticed that at Easter I began to use a different benediction at the end of worship. The charge renews God's call to us to engage in obedient and grateful ministry as God's agents to heal life's brokenness. The benediction uses the words of the Trinity and assures us of God's peace and blessing.

As each of us goes from this place may it be so for us: *Remain in God's grace. Abide in Christ's love. Dwell in the Spirit's presence. And may the blessings of God keep us in joy and move us to deeds of justice and lives of peace.*

In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.