

Sermon: Quietening Our Demons

Year C, Proper 7

[1 Kings 19:1-4,\(5-7\),8-15a](#); [Psalms 42 & 43](#); [Galatians 3:23-29](#); [Luke 8:26-39](#)

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I don't know what the last Father's Day cards were that I gave to my dad. I can tell you one was sentimental and sweet. At least one was funny. But beyond that, I couldn't say. If you asked my dad what the last Father's Day cards were that I gave him, he wouldn't know either. And that's the way it's supposed to be. Dad's are never supposed to know what the last Father's Day cards said. As kids, we're supposed to find that out when we empty his desk or the shoe box on his workbench or the bottom of his sock drawer. We kids are supposed to be able to say, "this was the last Father's Day card I ever sent him."

Today there is a whole tribe of dads down in Orlando who know for certain exactly what their last Father's Day card was, sentimental or funny or just chosen in a desperate hurry with an ill fitting envelope from the 24 hour pharmacy. Those dads know, and their kids don't. That's not the way it's supposed to work. We're supposed to exit this world in the order we arrived, parents first, then kids. Rachel is not supposed to weep for her children (Jeremiah 31:15). So when that breaks down, we break down. Our demons seize us and they drive us into the wilds (Luke 8:29).

In today's reading, Jesus arrives in the land of the Gerasenes. He's met by a man of the city who's possessed by demons. The man is naked, so Jesus must be able to see the bruises and the skin rubbed raw, Jesus must be able to see the limbs grown contorted because the man struggled so often and so mightily against his chains when his demons seized him. The man does not live in a home, so it's challenging for him to keep clean or eat regularly, even when the demons aren't riding him so hard. Jesus apparently orders the demon to leave him, because the man cries out "Do not torment me." There are a number of ways to understand that cry, but all of them lead basically to the same place, that the separation of demon from human is torment for one or both of them. While the drama of the pigs is going on (and isn't that just a wonderful visual, the pigs possessed and running down hill to the lake, sweeping everything before them), the man apparently finds some clothes. Because when we turn back from the scene at the Lake and the swineherds recounting their story, there the man is, clothed and sitting at Jesus' feet, in his right mind.

In this week, it feels like all we have seen is people seized by demons, driven out into the wilds. I mean the people who are stridently shouting that no civilian should have an AR-15, when it's clear on the surface that they have no idea what an AR-15 looks like. I mean the people saying that criminals will always get guns in any event, so gun regulation is pointless, when we regulate all sorts of other things because rules make it easier to tell the reasonable people from the criminals. I mean the people who say that this is not the world they want but there is nothing any one person can do to change it.

When our demons rise and drive us into the wilds, they are driving us away from other people. Oh, sure we may be standing two feet apart, but we're not listening to each other. And our demons are certainly not letting us see anyone as anything other than their demons. So we shout at each other. Or shout past each other. Or we let someone rant along and don't interrupt them because frankly who needs the kind of garbage that you'd catch if you did. We head off into the

wilds where our demons are most comfortable, where no one calls them on anything. We certainly don't.

For those of us who live with demons daily, we know how entwined we are in our demons. For me it's an eating disorder, for others it's alcohol or depression or putting our work ahead of our families. Our lives are shackled, constrained, driven at times by the demon. We know it. We struggle every day with that demon, trying to stay clothed and in our right minds. We know how painful it is to separate from our demons, because however much they deform us, they also define us. They are part of the eyes we see through. They fuel some of the strongest parts of us. For all the unclean, deplorable places they have brought us, our demons have formed our histories. We would not be who we are without them. Of course it is torment to separate the human from the demon.

What a week like this one reminds us is that just because we are in torment doesn't mean we don't leave our demons behind. Even if we are not entirely aware we have them.

Jesus looked at the naked man, battered and dirty, hungry and in torment, possessed by many demons and he saw the whole person. He saw the man's torment and he treated the demons with courtesy even as he separated them from the man. They did not want to be returned to the abyss, but the pigs would be ok. So Jesus gave them permission to go into the pigs. When the day's events were finally over, the man wanted to follow Jesus. Jesus saw this man who had been without a home for so long, who had been driven into the wilds by the demons repeatedly, Jesus saw the whole man and sent him home. By seeing and acknowledging the man beyond the demon, Jesus made it possible for him to be healed and for him to declare how much God had done for him.

So if we are going to follow Jesus, if we are going to be the body of Christ, if we are going to be the Church, then we are going to have to see people as more than their demons. We're going to have to treat their demons with respect. We're going to have to do everything in our power to diminish the torment when the demons and the humans are separated. We're going to have to see the whole person.

I know. I know. Do we have to see everyone as individuals, as whole people? It's so much easier if we just treat them as nothing more than the one shrieking demon on the surface. Couldn't we just sign petition like other churches? No. I mean, yes, of course. But, no. Because we are a small, rural church and we know something that the bigger churches in the bigger towns have forgotten. This is what God has given us and we have to share it with the wider world. We have to.

In a bigger town with more churches and in bigger churches, you can keep the demons from running into each other and therefore getting in the way. You can make a nice little nest out in the tombs with your demon and rarely feel a twinge of discomfort. But in a small town in a small church, we aren't all things to all people, we're one thing to all people. We worship together. No matter what else we do or are or believe, we worship God together. And then we go down and drink coffee. And we cook meals together and figure out how to keep the septic line from backing up and find out about how a nephew is doing and pray for each other's parents. We know perfectly well where everyone stands on guns, and it matters, because it's an important issue. But we don't define someone, even someone we really disagree with on an important issue, as only that one thing. We do this, in no small part, because we see each other as individuals.

That happens so rarely now because we can gate ourselves off from the viewpoints we find uncomfortable. The small churches in the small towns are the ones that are doing some of the hardest work of forming communities of common purpose with plenty of diversity. People don't think that to look at us, but it's true in so many ways. As a country, we have to work on guns. We have to work on race. We have to work on climate change. The list is endless. We have to have people who can care deeply, disagree and still get things done. That is a small church in a small town. We don't just live with our demons, we quiet them down.

So be the Church. The next time someone says that when either one of the candidates gets into the White House they will change the Constitution, speak up. It takes 2/3rds of the electorate and 4/5ths of the states to ratify a change in the Constitution. We couldn't get 40 states to agree on the color of the sky. Our Constitution ain't changing any time soon. But the fear that drives the comment in the first place is real and causing that person to howl against their chains.

Be the Church. See the whole person. Quiet your own demons who want to shriek back to express your fear. Imagine drinking coffee with the person standing up in a sunny social hall, asking about their family and their history. Be fierce and loving, just as you are here. Show the world how desperately we need our small rural churches to learn how to disagree and still care deeply for each other as individuals. Disagree and care deeply and change the parts of the world that do not look like the Beloved Community Jesus is building through us. Be the Church.