

## **Sermon: The Demons We Live With**

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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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

I do truly love today's reading from Luke. I know as a minister you're not supposed to have favorites stories from the Bible. But this is one of my favorites. I think it's the pigs. Isn't that just a wonderful visual, the pigs possessed and running downhill to the lake, sweeping everything before them. In my mind it's an episode from the Muppet Show that never got made. So, yeah, it's definitely the pigs. And it's definitely the demons.

In today's world, we don't talk much about demons. I'm glad we've made advances in mental health. I benefited from them personally. I'm glad we've begun to explore the stunning variety of ways individual brains can work. But I think we might have lost something too, when we stopped talking about demons.

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.

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.

Those are the demons we carry inside us, that we know about, that we try to hide from public view. I doubt we're ever very successful. But at least we know about them.

There is another kind of demon which possesses us, that I don't think we're as aware of. There's something we have an opinion on, guns or race or climate change, take your pick, there are a bunch of them these days. The demon is not the opinion. The demon is that we would rather stay in relationship with that opinion than stay in relationship with the people standing right in front of us.

When those 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 when you do. We head off into the wilds where our demons are most comfortable, where no one calls them on anything. We certainly don't. We're not entirely aware those demons live inside us, although somehow we're really capable of seeing them in other people.

Jesus looked at the naked man, battered and dirty, hungry and in torment, possessed by many demons and he saw the whole person. And he saw both kinds of demon. The first kind, the kind that shackled, constrained and drove the man, Jesus treated those 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 Muppet Show drama of the pigs going off the cliff is over, the man has apparently found 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. 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 demons, Jesus made it possible for him to be healed and for him to declare how much God had done for him. Jesus healed him in public, so that the man could return to his community and be in relationship with them, not just with his demons.

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. Isn't there a way we could just write them off, or write a check to some organization and not deal with those people at all? I'm so sorry, but no. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "*Here I am, here I am,*" to a nation that did not call on my name (Isaiah 65:1). God is calling us even when we are not calling God. God is reaching out to a rebellious people, to a people who walk in a way which is not good (Isaiah 65:2), (that would be us). God is showing us what God wants, and it is not to leave people to their demons. God is showing us that God wants us in relationship, with God and with each other.

And as if seeing the whole person wasn't enough, as if looking past their demons wasn't a sufficient challenge, as small, rural churches we have an additional challenge because we have an additional gift. We know something that the bigger churches in the bigger towns have forgotten. And we have to share it with the wider world. We have to.

In a bigger town with more 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. You can gather around with all the other people who have the same opinion as you do on guns and race and climate change, and you can stay in an untroubled relationship with your opinion and not enter into any relationship with people who disagree with you. Because they go to another church that meets in another area and is full of people who agree with their opinions.

But in a small church in a small town, 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 and drink coffee. And we sing at coffee houses 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 even let some of our demons go. We don't necessarily change our opinions, but we don't let our relationships with our opinions get in the way of our relationships with each other.

Be the Church. See the whole person. Quiet your own demons who want to shriek back to meet the shrieking of the other demons. Imagine drinking coffee with the person as you both stand 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 and still get stuff done. 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. Show the world what it looks like to live with demons.