



"I Dare You"

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Luke 8:26-39 (NRSV)***

The Gerasean demonic (or the man who lived among the tombs) in today's gospel reading is an enigma to many of us.

For those of us who bring intellectual inquiry to the text we wonder, "What is a Gerasean demonic?" and "What in the world does this character and his story have to do with us?"

Demons don't really exist, do they?

Who or what is a Gerasean?

Answers to the question about demons vary, depending on who you ask. We'll come back to that issue in a moment.

The Q&A about a Gerasean is a little easier.

According to Luke, Gerasene was a large Roman city founded by Alexander located southeast of Galilee, and populated primarily by Gentiles. Today's gospel story prefigures Jesus' mission to the Gentiles, who were perceived by the disciples as "the great unwashed." So in other words, Jesus' exorcism of the Gerasean demonic is about Jesus' ministry beyond his home culture, and his willingness to reach out to those whom others saw as "untouchables."

Biblical scholars tend to agree that the historical facts about today's gospel reading are less important than the theological significance of the setting, the interchange between Jesus and the man whom he healed, and the results of the exorcism.

According to Luke, the man who lived among the tombs was not just possessed by one kind of demon. He was possessed by many. So Luke 8 was not a run-of-the-mill exorcism. It was an extraordinary exorcism that resulted in the total

transformation of a man who had given up on himself, and who had been given up for lost by virtually everyone in his community.

Like other exorcisms described in scripture, today's account follows a familiar narrative pattern. It begins with Jesus confronting and naming the demons and commanding them to leave the afflicted person. It continues with the exorcism and a description of the person who was healed, and ends with a description of the effects that the exorcism had on the witnesses to it.¹

II

To appreciate the significance of this healing—this exorcism—in Luke 8, it's helpful to work through some of our own baggage about demons and exorcisms. Let's face it, smart, progressive people like us don't spend much time thinking about, much less talking about demons and exorcisms, right?

The concepts of demons and exorcisms seem outmoded to us. We associate belief in demons and the practices of exorcisms with primitive societies and uneducated people. We think of modern societies and people like ourselves, by contrast, as people who rely on intellectual theories and scientific methodologies for our diagnoses and treatment plans, right?

Well, that was the perspective that 13 years of higher education taught me to take. But 22 years of ordained ministry taught me something different. Twenty-two years of practical experience taught me that “demons” do exist, that metaphors like “demon possession” are helpful ways of describing certain kinds of mental illnesses and addictions, and the effects that these maladies have on persons who are affected by them. Metaphors like “demons” and “exorcism” give voice to complicated phenomena that our fancy scientific theories and state-of-the-art medications, neither adequately describe nor fully remedy.

Furthermore, having seen more than a few people's situations where “all the king's horses and all the king's men” couldn't put someone back together again, I understand why loved ones may be moved to seek what some would call “alternative therapies” including exorcism to describe the need for and hoped for turnaround in a loved one's life.

I am not unique among educated clergy and therapists to hold these views about demons and demon possession. Over the years, I have heard more than one pastoral counseling professor and practitioner refer to today's gospel lesson when describing certain types of mental illness and addiction, and the spiritual and social dynamics that such maladies engender for those of us who are affected by them.

¹ Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, and Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 311.

I've also known recovering addicts who identify strongly with the Gerasean demonic. One of my seminary colleagues years ago told me that she saw herself in the Gerasean demoniac and that she particularly identified with his troubles when she was in the depths of addiction to alcohol. She said:

I was like the man who lived among the tombs. I was so mired in addiction that I lost my job, my friends, and even my family for a time. I sacrificed everything to ensure my next drink, and I ran off everyone who tried to help me. In the end, I created my own self-imposed exile.

Most of us have probably lived long enough to know someone who has been plagued by mental illness or addiction.

Now I'm not talking about your garden variety type of anxiety or depression that can be treated successfully with medications and talk therapy. I'm talking about the kind of mental illness that therapists and psychiatrists find hard to diagnosis and even harder to treat.

I'm talking about the kind of mental illness that makes it difficult for a person to function in society, the kinds of illness that lead to ostracism, and eventually to institutionalization. I'm talking about the kind of mental illness that keeps ill persons and their families from considering therapy or psychiatric help—because they are too ashamed or too afraid of helping professionals.

Perhaps the worst circumstances of all—perhaps the persons in our time who are most like the Gerasean demonic—are those persons whose mental illness and addiction are so intertwined that even capable psychiatrists can't separate the two, because the addict (who is also mentally ill) has used alcohol or drugs to numb emotional pain and has compounded the mental illness and compromised his or her physical health too.

So now we know a bit more about the Gerasean demoniac, maybe more than we would like to know. Maybe we know enough now to realize who the Gerasean demoniacs are in our lives. Maybe we have even played the part of the demoniac ourselves.

Now I know that I am treading on tender territory here by lining out the parallels between an obscure, enigmatic character in biblical times and people in our time, but I'm doing this to make the point that Jesus made and that Luke made, which is that we worship a God who is intimately concerned with those whose lives are a total mess. So if we recognize ourselves or a loved one in this passage now, this recognition is actually good news for us.

It's good news that God cares about our messed up lives. It's good news that Jesus won't be run off. It's good news that he teaches the importance of staying put, and working through our issues rather than running away from the past and

the people with whom we need to reconcile. It's good news that Jesus dares the demoniac—dares us—to declare what God has done for us. It's good news that Jesus dares us to go and tell people who we know what God has done for us.

III

These messages about the Gerasen demonic aren't easy messages to hear, and they aren't easy messages to deliver. Trust me, when you tell your good news story to others, it will not be popular with everyone. There are risks and challenges associated with new life. Not everyone will be thrilled with your total transformation, because some people benefit from the troubles of others.

The way that Luke tells the story, Jesus cast out the man's demons and sent the demons into a swine herd. The swine were terrified, rushed down a steep hill, fell into the lake, and were drowned—but the man was healed.

If you listen carefully to the story, you hear that Jesus was messing with the local economy. Somebody was out a swine herd. Somebody else had to develop a communications plan to explain the disaster. And a lot of people were forced to adjust to skyrocketing pork prices, and an abrupt end to the gravy train that the peace officers were on, because the overtime pay they got for supervising the demoniac had come to a screeching halt. So you see, there were a lot of people benefiting from the possessed man's demons, and consciously or not, there were many reasons that very few would challenge the status quo.

Clearly the Gerasene were terrified of Jesus' healing power. Luke says so in verse 36. The citizens of Gerasene were so afraid of Jesus' power to heal that they weren't sure how much more healing they could take, so they ran him out of town. After all, now that the demoniac had been healed, the focus of their pity and scorn was removed. Now they were pressed to deal with their own issues, and face the prospect of one of them becoming the new focus of the community's attention.

It's not hard to imagine that the Pork Producers, the Peace Officers Union, the Chamber of Commerce, and some consumer rights organization might have organized themselves to run Jesus out of town.

When the man whom Jesus had healed got word of his impending departure, he begged to go with Jesus. And why not? He was probably afraid of a relapse, and wanted to be near his physician. He was probably eager for a brand new start in a place where no one knew about his past.

Despite his insistence, Jesus did not allow the man to follow him. Instead, he said, go home and tell your people how much God has done for you (Lk. 8:39). The man did as Jesus commanded him. He returned home spreading the word that he had been healed, and giving thanks to Jesus.

Today's gospel reading ends on a powerful note. It ends with Jesus' charge to the healed man to return home, and declare how much God has done for him.

If we identify at all with the Gerasen demoniac, this passage is filled with a profound set of challenges: challenges to receive the people who would help us heal; challenges to maintain a changed lifestyle; and challenges to return to our homes and face the difficult but important conversations that need to be had.

This isn't easy work. In fact, it's probably the hardest work that anyone ever does. But the good news is that our healing doesn't depend solely on our efforts. Jesus offers us a model of how to begin the healing, and his promise of spiritual companionship along the way.

And if someone we love resembles the Gerasen demoniac, this passage also challenges us to support another's healing by doing our own work—by looking at our own patterns of behavior that need to change in order to support another's healing. These changes may include affirming our loved one's responsibility for their own lives and recovery, and they may include giving up to God the things that we cannot control.

Again, this is not easy work I am talking about here. It's not easy to be in relationship with a Gerasen demoniac. It's not easy being the Gerasen demoniac. But naming the demons and taking the steps toward healing that are reflected in Luke 8 are steps that can lead to a total transformation of one's life and the lives of those with whom we are in community. This is not easy work, but it is holy work. And as we do it, a whole new way of life becomes possible. That's what the story of the Gerasen demoniac is all about. That's what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about—declaring that a total transformation is possible. Thanks be to God. Amen.