

Year C Proper 12 Luke 8 26 to 39

In this story of Jesus healing a man possessed by many demons we experience the astounding power of, as the demons call him, the Son of the Most High God. But, what may not be quite so obvious at first hearing, is that we are also told of the power that we have – power given to us by the Son of the Most High God.

This story is very intense and has a lot of details. Luke clearly wants to paint a very important picture for us of Jesus and of our own importance as Jesus' followers. Let us journey with Jesus to that foreign place across the lake and look on this scene with the eyes of Jesus' followers who were with him that day.

Jesus has just expanded the definition of family for us. When his mother and brothers came looking for him, he told everyone there with him that his family wasn't just his parents and siblings and other relatives. His family was everyone who hears the word of God and does it (Luke 8:21). We weren't sure what he was talking about – family doesn't work that way – but we didn't have time to think about it because, for some reason only he knew, Jesus decided we were going to go across the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile side...to the place of the Gerasenes.

Our boat was nearly swamped by the storm that raged about us in the middle of the lake but Jesus was sleeping. We woke him and all he did was speak a few words and everything was calm again. He just told the wind and the waves to stop and they did. He went back to sleep and we wondered among ourselves, "Who is this that even the winds and the water obey his commands?" (8:24-25). That question was soon answered for us from an unlikely source.

We landed in the country of the Gerasenes in, of all places, a graveyard. Not only were we landing among unclean Gentiles, tending unclean pigs, we were among their

dead...dead creatures of any kind are unclean. Why had we come to this God-forsaken place?

We were greeted, alarmingly so, by a pathetic human – barely recognizable as human. He was raving mad and naked. His wrists and ankles were an angry red, rubbed raw by the chains and shackles probably meant to help keep him safe from himself and keep others safe from him. He was wandering alone among the dead. He might as well have been dead himself. We hung back but Jesus went straight up to him and commanded the evil spirit to come out of him.

The man dropped to the ground and yelled at Jesus, calling him the Son of the Most High God. Well, that would certainly explain why he was able to calm the raging storm with simply a word. We watched the scene unfold with fascination. “Why have you come to torment me?” he asks our beloved teacher. Torment is the Greek word *basanizo* and it literally means “to rub on a touchstone”. A touchstone was a stone used to test the quality of metals, especially gold and silver. Here was Jesus, our touchstone, showing this man that the quality of his life was far beneath the level of what life should be. Jesus, our touchstone, stands in stark contrast to the darkness of the demons inhabiting this poor man, keeping him from the life he should be living. The contrast is painful, unbearable.

Jesus doesn't answer the man. He knows it is the demons within who are balking at his presence. Jesus asks his name and discovers not one or two but many demons are enslaving this human before him. “Legion,” they answer him. Well now, that definitely adds a new dimension to this encounter. A Legion is a unit of about 6000 soldiers in the Roman army – the army oppressing the people, keeping them from the true freedom of our God. This is not simply a healing miracle unfolding before our eyes. This is huge – this is a battle between Jesus and forces both seen and

unseen. Jesus has come to us not only to heal individuals of all that bind them...disease, addiction, mental health issues...but also to free us from something that has become much greater than ourselves.

Last summer I led a study of a book by Walter Brueggemann called *Sabbath as Resistance*. God commanded us to have a sabbath day not simply as a day of rest from labour and a day to be able to think more deeply on our God. Sabbath keeping was intended to be the great equalizer. The Hebrew people, who had been the slaves of the Egyptians – the lower class, those who worked while others benefited from their labour – the Hebrew people were told to remember this oppression and to make sure that it didn't happen again by taking a day of sabbath rest. Every seven days, everyone was to have a day of rest – from the one sweeping the floor at Mac's Milk to the CEO of Bell Canada. Not only that, there was to be a jubilee year – after seven times seven years all property was to revert back to its original owner so that no one could amass wealth at the expense of others. Sabbath was meant to ensure that social classes, inequality, poverty, oppression never developed in their God-led community. It was a community that was the polar opposite of every other community on earth, communities not led by God. But they didn't follow the "great equalizer" commands of God. As our study group tried to imagine a world in which everyone rested on the seventh day, everyone unplugged from consumerism for an entire day, we were stumped by the seeming impossibility of that. Even back in the day when stores were not open on a Sunday, that didn't mean everyone was resting. Shipping lanes were open, gas stations were open, the freight trains were still running. Our leisure activities are often built on the fact that others need to serve us as we relax. The entire tourism industry revolves around the concept that, while some are able to take time away from work, others must serve their needs...selling tickets, being tour guides, serving meals, and so on. This is just one of many ways in

which we are so enmeshed in the way the world that we don't know how to fix it. Not following the "great equalizer" commands has created multiple systemic wrongness. I could give away every last dollar I have to the needy people I encounter on the streets of Sault Ste Marie and I will not have made a dent in the poverty of the city. But we are not to lose hope.

Face to face with Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, the demons recognize the futility of their situation. Their time of oppressing this man is coming to an end. Faced with the perfection and power of Jesus, they submit. Not even the dark power of 6000 demons can resist the might of the one before them. They ask Jesus for a favour though. If they must leave this human, please do not send them back to the abyss they say. Let them, instead, inhabit this herd of pigs around them. We saw the corner of Jesus' mouth twitch into the hint of a smile that was gone as fast as it had appeared. "Sure," he told them. "You can go into the pigs."

As soon as the demons left the man and entered the pigs, those pigs ran down the hill and were drowned in the sea. The demons ended up in the abyss they thought they were going to avoid and those Gerasenes were going to be eating roast pig until it came out their eyeballs. The swineherders nearly fainted when their pigs ran into the sea with the demons inside of them. The swineherders ran off to the city to tell everyone what had just happened.

When the townspeople arrive at the scene, the once-possessed man is sitting at Jesus' feet – a declaration that he is now a disciple, a follower of Jesus. The man feels love and inclusion where he once only felt the fear and exclusion oozing from the people around him. He is a part of our community now and Jesus' expanded definition of family suddenly becomes clear. This man is a part of the family of God. You would think that the townspeople would be amazed and welcoming of Jesus

when they hear and see what he has done for that man but, instead, they are frightened.

Who is this man who returns a sick man to his right mind? Who is this man who commands demons? He is powerful and represents the unknown. If they welcome him, they would be welcoming the end of the comfortable existence of knowing how things work, of knowing their place in society. Jesus has the power and authority over all things, the power to change the world into the perfection of God's kingdom and not everyone welcomes that sort of change. We see today who welcomes it – people like the demon-possessed man in our story, people who have nothing left to lose. Changing the world is a very frightening prospect – in part because we find it impossible to imagine....like trying to imagine a world in which it is possible for every single person to take a day of sabbath rest on the same day.

The people ask Jesus to leave – and he does – but he leaves behind a witness. He leaves behind one person whose life has been changed, who has been welcomed into God's kingdom and who is instructed to proclaim, "what God has done for him." This is where our power comes into the picture.

As we explore Scripture more deeply it becomes clear that words are very important. Jesus is called the Word of God. All that God is and knows, is in Jesus, his Word. And that Word is powerful – that word heals, restores life, calms the raging sea. When John was given his vision – the revelation – of what will happen when Jesus comes again, we discover that Jesus defeats all the powers of death and destruction with his two-edged sword. A sword not wielded in his hand but a sword that is his tongue – his words. We have learned over the past few weeks that we have been given Jesus' presence within us in the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have the Word of God within us and, as Peter says, this gift is ours, because we "are a chosen race, a

royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). To proclaim, to speak in word and action, that is our task, the task given to us by Jesus to continue his work of building up his body on earth. Peter knows this is so – he is the one, the stone, Jesus said, upon whom will be the foundation of his church. Peter tells us that we are all living stones, building a spiritual house – we are all the word of God building up Christ’s body (1 Peter 2:5).

Jesus tells us that against us – the living stones of his word – the gates of hades will not prevail (Matt.16:18). The gates of hades cannot withstand the word of God. When Jesus uses the word “hades,” he is referring to the experience of many people in *this* life, experience characterized by everything that is opposed to the ways of Jesus Christ and the will of God on earth. Rather than life, light, liberty, and love, those who are trapped behind the gates of hadēs live in bondage, corruption, despair, and destruction. Jesus leads his Church, those who bear his word, against all that is wrong in the world, delivering the people trapped behind those doors – as he today delivered the man from his demons – from bondage into freedom.

We are banging on the doors of every kind of oppression and injustice and those gates will not stand. As Jesus removes barriers, like we saw in today’s Gospel story, so now do we. We are God’s word in a world that desperately needs to hear that word of love, inclusion, peace, and hope. We do not need to be able to imagine how God will bring about the perfection we know is coming – for the power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. We must trust that it is so and keep banging on the doors of hades because they cannot stand.