



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI
www.goodshepherdwi.org

“Return to Your Home....”

Rev. David K. Groth

“The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return to your home and tell them how much God has done for you’”(Lk. 8:38-39).

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 23, 2013**

Collect of the Day

O God, You have prepared for those who love You such good things as surpass our understanding. Cast out all sins and evil desires from us, and pour into our hearts Your Holy Spirit to guide us into all blessedness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

It is a strange story in our Gospel. Jesus and his disciples had sailed across the Sea of Galilee and stepped out onto the southeast shore. Immediately he is confronted by this man possessed by demons. His is a wretched existence. He's a menace to himself and everyone else. Luke writes, "For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs." Mark describes a maniacal strength: "no one could control him, not even with chains, for he tore them apart and broke the irons on his feet." Mark also says, "Night and day among the tombs he would cry out and cut himself with stones." Matthew says the man was "so fierce that no one could pass that way."

No one knows what to do with him. There are no institutions to send him off to, no mental health hospitals. He's got a mother and father somewhere, but they don't know what to do with him. "We've tried everything" they say. "This is not how we raised him. We can't control him either." Everyone is afraid of him . . . except Jesus.

In the Bible, demons want nothing to do with Jesus. Verse 28, "When he saw Jesus he cried out, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus?'" The sense is, "Go away. Leave me alone." But why then did the demon approach Jesus in the first place? Why didn't he just run for the hills? I think this is part of the miracle. It appears as if the will of Jesus is drawing the man to Jesus, almost like a magnet. That is, it's an involuntary approach compelled by the Savior who wants to save.

"What is your name?" Jesus asks him. "Legion" the man says, for there are many spirits inhabiting him.

This is gentile territory, not Jewish, so there's a large herd of pigs on the steep hillside leading down to the sea. The demons beg Jesus not to send them to the abyss,

to hell, but to let them enter that herd of pigs. It seems like spirits seek out hosts like Wisconsin ticks seek out you and me. So the pigs, now inhabited by the spirits, rush headlong into the sea where they drown. What happened to the demons? No idea . . . nor should we expect to understand much about their world.

In any event, it's hard to picture a man more miserable than this one. Half dead himself, he lived among the dead. Bizarre, dangerous, unpredictable, he was out of the reach even of his parents' love, but he was not out of the reach of God's love. The man was absolutely unlovable. Jesus found a way to love him. And notice the impact. The man's no longer naked but dressed; not blathering at the mouth, but in his right mind; not cutting himself, or shrieking or attacking anyone, but sitting quietly. It reminds me of Zephaniah 3, "The Lord your God . . . will quiet you with his love" (v.17).

The townsfolk come out. They look at their pigs bobbing about in the shallows, and they look at the man who once terrorized them sitting calmly at the feet of Jesus. A picture is worth a thousand words. They don't know exactly what happened, but they know it had something to do with Jesus. And so . . . they ask Jesus to get in his boat and shove off! Isn't that interesting?! If given a choice between saving a herd of pigs and the eternal soul of this man, the townspeople would have gone with the pigs! They've done some quick math in their heads and have concluded it's simply too expensive to have this Jesus around; the costs are too high. They can cope with a demoniac haunting their graveyard, but they cannot cope with this.

By the way, this is why many people resist Jesus today. He upsets the balance in their lives. He throws things out of order. He tells us to change things about us that maybe we don't want to change. There are times when we all do the math and our voices join those of the ancient people of Gerasene, and we politely ask Jesus to leave.

And you know what? Jesus does. That, frankly, is

the most frightening part of this whole passage: not the maniacal strength or wickedness of demons but the fact that Jesus will not stay where he is not welcome. He will not force himself upon anyone. That's the way ticks and demons work; that's not the way Jesus works. He will not jump anyone, but gives us the awesome freedom to reject him. So, at the request of these respectable people, Jesus quietly gets into his boat.

But he's not through with them just yet. He's going to leave behind one of his witnesses, none other than the man who had been possessed of demons. The man doesn't want to go back to that village. A new life has been given him; he doesn't want to step back into the old. That same voice is begging Jesus again. "Let me go with you. Let me follow you." This time Jesus denies him. This time Jesus seems almost cold. "He sent him away" the text says. But it's motivated by love. "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you."

Jesus is sending his newest disciple to the same people who just asked him to leave. This too is love to the unlovable. The townsfolk were decent, well-adjusted, respectable people, but what they don't know is they need the grace of Jesus every bit as much as did that howling demoniac who haunted the tombs.

"Tell them how much God has done for you." We can imagine his objections. *But I'm no theologian.* "Tell them how much God has done for you." *But I have no training in evangelism.* "Tell them how much God has done for you." *You know my reputation precedes me.* "Tell them how much God has done for you."

That's the work God has given each of us. We are hardly theologians nor professional evangelists nor do any of us have lily white reputations, especially among the locals who know us the best. But to each of us, God has given this work of telling our story, telling how much He has done for us. If he can use this man, I guess that means he can use any of us. Nobody gets a pass here. People don't want to hear theological jargon anyway, but they will listen to your story, to what God has done for you. 1 Peter 3, "Always be prepared to . . . give the reason for the hope that is in you (v. 15).

In Mark's account Jesus says, "Go home to your *friends*, and tell *them* how he has had mercy on you." You have friends who are part of the mission field too. They're not chanting "death to America"; they're your friends. They respect you and will listen to you. Think of it: Not even Jesus could reach the people of that village anymore. The only potential witness for them was this man who once called himself Legion.

Similarly, there are people in your lives who wouldn't give me the time of day. Maybe they don't trust strangers or clergy or strange clergy. . . or maybe I creamed them in Sheepshead and they still resent it. For whatever reason, they may not listen to me, but they will listen to you. You may not think yourself an evangelist, yet in your baptism God called you to this work. "Tell them how much God has done for you."

I don't know about you, but when I hear a preacher badgering his listeners to "Go into all the world and make disciples", it makes me feel weak and small, poor, and, lazy. How are we to make disciples of all nations when half of our own city doesn't know Moses from Abraham? How is Good Shepherd to make disciples of all nations when it's all we can do to make the payroll next week? We are a weak and simple lot and the task of taking on the world is beyond us . . . unless our part of taking on the world is right here, in this community. That we can do. We know these people, and they us. We work with them, play with them, and root mostly for the Goslings and the Green Bay Packers and against the Chicago Bears with them. We know these people. Maybe as we become better at inviting people we know to meet Jesus here, at Good Shepherd, maybe then we will be more able to support those full time missionaries in distant lands.

After all, very few of us are being called to learn Mandarin and go to the Far East as fulltime missionaries. Very few of us are being called to pick up and move to the seminary, or to become Lutheran school teachers. But in Holy Baptism God has called each of us to engage in mission and mercy work, and this work begins very close to home. It can happen while changing diapers. (Sing "Jesus loves me this I know.") It happens at work. ("Robert, I know your son has been ill. I just want to let you know I'm praying for him, and if it's okay my church will pray for him this weekend too.") It happens while caring for an aged parent. ("Mom, how 'bout I bring you to

church on Sunday?) Right on the other side of that field of grass and flowers next to our drive is another field, the mission field. Some missionaries travel many time zones to get to their mission field. You and I can get there in less than five minutes.

Fully one-third of Americans now count themselves as “nones”, none of the above, not affiliated with any religious denomination. Some of these are in your family and mine. Tell them how much God has done for you. If they don’t have a church, invite them here. That’s not too hard, is it?

Please don’t think of this as grim and joyless work. According to Martin Luther, “there is nothing more delightful and lovable on earth than one’s neighbor. Love does not think about works, it finds joy in people” (*Wingren, Luther on Vocation*, 43). Did you hear that? “Love does not think about works. It finds joy in people.” That’s where life is to be lived . . . not in the sandbox of selfishness, but in finding joy in people, treating them with dignity, serving them in Christ’s name, and finding joy in them.

We should not present ourselves to this community with the sad, bent posture of those who know the world is in ruins and the church is on the decline. No, we have reason to be joyous anyway. After all, the victory has been won. Christ has died and Christ is risen. Your sin is forgiven. Salvation is by grace, not works. We have reason to be joyous anyway.

“Joyous anyway.” It reminds me of the prophet Habakkuk. In chapter three he gives a litany of everything that is going wrong in his world. Listen to this: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” (I love that. I haven’t passed this by Gail yet, but someday I’d like that on my tombstone.) “Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” Joyous anyway, because sin is forgiven and there will be resurrection and everlasting life.

“Tell them what God has done for you.” So smile and

embrace this world and the people of this world. Wade in, as if our love of life itself is a proclamation of the grace and generosity and love of God, an appreciation of the world he gave us, and an unending song of thanksgiving for the salvation he has won. It's not wrong to love the world. God did . . . and still does. Tell them how much.

That's what Jesus sent the man to do. Can you picture him walking back to his city? He really didn't want to go there; he wanted to be in that boat going somewhere else with Jesus and his disciples. But Jesus had other plans for that community. Luke writes, "And so he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him." "Love to the loveless shown", we sang, "that they might lovely be!"

We never hear of this man again, but don't you wonder whatever became of him? We do know this. One day Jesus came back to those people who once told him to go away. He graciously came back and this time the people in that area welcome him gladly. In fact, they crowd around him. This time they bring to him all their sick, and they say of him, "He has done everything well" (Mk. 7:37). "Love to the loveless, that they might lovely be." Could this man's witness have had something to do with that? It doesn't say, but I like to think so. This time, they don't tell Jesus to leave; this time they beg him to stay. And I suspect our man who once called himself "Legion" is there too, glad to see the warm and earnest hospitality. He was once quieted by the love of God, and then he was given his voice back.

"Return to your home, and tell how much God has done for you." Amen.

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