

Third Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 6C]

June 22, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Psalm 32; Luke 7: 36-8:3

Demons or Freedom – Which Is Scarier?

Here he goes again. Jesus is in the wrong place, with the wrong type of people, at the wrong time. He's in a place "opposite of Galilee," which scholars can't exactly pin down but they solidly agree it's in Gentile territory — a region not inhabited by Hebrews, an area considered ritually unclean, a place a good Jewish boy should not go. Jesus no sooner puts his foot on this so-called unholy land and a demonically possessed man runs up to him. I can just hear the apostles saying, "Get back in the boat!... get back in the boat!" But not Jesus. No sir, not traditional boundaries, demons, or a dirty, naked outcast will keep Jesus from showing the power and love of God. He steps out of the boat and immediately goes about the work of setting people free.

The man was possessed by demons. Some would say that this was merely the ancient's way of speaking of mental illness or epilepsy or "the devil made me do it". But what exactly does this gospel tells us about these demons? (1) They were unhealthy spirits that prevented the man from knowing life in it's fullest. (2) Demons isolated him from his community. (3) These demons were powerful. The townspeople had tried to keep them under guard and shackled with chains, but they'd break the bonds and take the man into the wilds. (4) These demons were not dumb or oblivious. They recognized the opposing power of the Lord of life and the Lord of all that is good, even when a town did not.

Who are these powerful demons that keep us from the life in abundance Jesus offers us? Who are these demons so strong and cunning that they can resist the healing and transforming power of God? Yes, there is "Evil" with a capital "E" - the adversary that which opposes the ways and will of God and good. Is that what we are seeing at work in Geresene or rather are these demons examples of other subtle forces that can take hold of US and our

lives? We may not call these forces or habits “demons” but we know they possess us, they have control of all or part of our lives and we feel helpless to resist them.

This is tender territory, I know. I think we all have demons of a kind that we may or may not be able to name, hide or temporarily shackle, yet they can drive our lives in unhealthy directions. They raise their hand up to Jesus and say, “Get away! This one’s mine!” This is tender territory because it confronts those parts of us we want to either avoid, disguise as virtues or fear their absence.

I did my required seminary unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Wesley Woods in Georgia, the geriatric campus of Emory Hospital. The CPE program is designed to help future ministers develop pastoral skills in hospital and crisis settings. It is also intended to make participants go into their shadow and meet their own demons, those parts of ourselves that *will* interfere with a healthy spiritual life and ministry. It is while you do the reflective writing and have discussions with your supervisor and peers, that you must name and claim your demons. It can be a raw, exhausting yet fruitful experience.

My regular assignment was split between an Alzheimer floor in an assisted living complex and a long-term care unit in the geriatric hospital where patients were being weaned off ventilators. It took me a week to finally walk into a patient’s room at that hospital. I’d go up to a door and I was like a deer frozen in the headlights. These were people who generally could not converse with me. A monolog of idle chitchat or faith talk seemed disrespectful. I went to my supervisor, tail between my legs, to confess my failure. We first tackled my concern for their privacy in a place where you are given little to none. Knock on the door and ask if you may visit. Honor their answer.

The second, more debilitating issue was my fear. “What are you afraid of?” She asked me. And I reached down and pulled out inadequacy, failure and doing harm. I am the classic overachiever, carefully guarding my fragile confidence. When I do something, I want to do it

well or not at all. Nothing wrong with that, except when it prevents you from even trying new things or keeps you from doing something uncomfortable to which God has called you to do. I want people to like me and think well of me. Again, nothing wrong with that unless it will keep you from saying, doing and being all God wants you to be to avoid being unpopular in your family, among your peers, at church or in community. I felt ashamed and defeated that my rational and irrational needs and fears were getting in the way of ministering to others.

While I don't remember the exact words of my supervisor, I do know she asked me to trust the gifts and compassion God had already given me for helping and caring. And she asked me to consider if I would let Jesus free me from the fears and unhealthy drives that can take possession of me. I now realize she was pointing me toward today's gospel.

I don't know what demons you battle. Some are rooted deeply in our early years and others are acquired during experiences and circumstance throughout our lives. Working hard, watching TV, sex, humor, independence, enjoyment of good clothing, food, cars, recreation or a home, for example, are not demons when they are part of a faithful life, aligned with the will of God. But when they separate us from our Lord and others, they become the demons of — workaholicism, holding truth and loved ones a bay, pornography, illicit affairs, meanness, sarcasm, greed, materialism and only looking out for #one (yourself) — and those possessive demons will damage our health, marriages, families, friendships, work place, children and community. Demons are usually deceptive and cunning. Demons give us the illusion of control, while they really control us. Only you know what gets in the way of receiving and living God's love in all it's bounty. Only you may know the pain and hurt it has caused.

So hear loud and clear with me the good news of today's gospel. Jesus will *not* run away from you, or me or our worst. Jesus will *not* be overcome by our demons or fall for their tricks. Jesus *has* the power to loosen their grip on our lives and bring us to new life. Jesus wants to free us *from* what knots our lives and free us *for* living that has meaning, peace and

joy. And Jesus will do it again and again and again for each and every one of us. It sounds great, doesn't it? Oh, but look out for those demons of doubt and fear. Jesus drove out demons and restored a man's life. But the town folks drove Jesus off in fear. It wasn't just the swine turned into deviled ham. (*Sorry, I couldn't resist*) but it was meeting divine power that could change their lives in ways they did not understand and could not control. Can you understand that kind of fear? I can.

Open myself to Jesus and I just may find myself giving up habits I consider friends. You may find yourself involved in planning a Block Party or discover you have what it takes to be among a cadre of Sunday School teachers. If Jesus frees us from the demons that sap us of life, we just may be happy and no longer feel envy or the need to amass money or possessions... we just may receive the unknown strength we need to face the pain, grief or illness we don't want to face. Being freed in the Kingdom of God will mean letting the Lord take the lead, set the priorities and standards and give us heart to love and value everyone, even our enemy. It can be a frightening thing to put your life in the healing, loving hands of our living God. Yet, what a promised life of purpose, delight and hope it is, partnered and yoked to the Creator of the Universe, the Savior Jesus Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? But it also sounds little scary, too. We have the freedom, like those town people, to tell Jesus to leave us. We also have the freedom to pray timidly or boldly, "Come Lord Jesus, set me free". That is what we do each week when we gather here — we open ourselves again and again to the power of God in the word, bread and wine, the community and our prayer. Then each morning we decide if we will let Jesus out of the boat onto the shore of our lives or tell him to leave. It's our choice. Today, in this time and place, we pray boldly, "Come, Lord Jesus, set us free! Set us free!" Amen

Pastor Linda M Alessandri