

Year C  
Second Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 7  
Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 8:26-39

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I imagine that all of us have felt like an outsider, at one time or another. Either because we're in a foreign country, or we don't really speak the language of the group we're in, or we're new to a situation or a place, it's easy to feel like we don't belong. In today's gospel we heard the story of an extreme outsider, a passage that's often called the Story of the Gerasene Demoniac. a demoniac is someone who is possessed by a demon. In fact, his man was possessed by so many demons that they, as a group, called themselves Legion. A legion was a Roman military unit of between 3,000 to 6,000 soldiers, so we are talking about a lot of demons controlling this man. There were so many, and they were so strong that the man couldn't even be held in the community; even if they chained him up, he broke the chains and ran away to live naked and filthy, away from the living community, with the dead, among the tombs.

Today, if we had a man like this in our midst, we would probably say that he was mentally ill, and hospitalize him. You might know, for instance, that we have two locked psychiatric units at Winchester Medical Center: one for adults, and one for geriatric adults. We regularly have people there who report being tormented by demons, and I've often talked with them, and prayed with them. It's always unsettling to me when they report this particular affliction, because, even though I know that it's VERY likely that their torment is because of mental illness, and not demonic, there is always, at least to my mind, the possibility that they are possessed. When we talk, I always ask, "when your medication is balanced, do you still hear these voices?" And they have always answered "no, the voices go way when my meds are balanced." Because of that, I then feel safe to point out that the voices are definitely a result of mental illness, and not really from demons. Because if the problem were a demon, no amount of medication would make any difference. That reframing of the situation always seems comforting, and it's something people tell me that they hang onto, and sometimes they even tell this to the voices. One woman said she tells the voices, "YOU are not real— you're just my schizophrenia talking, and I don't have to listen to you."

There's one patient, whom I'll call Dan, who checks himself into the behavioral health unit a few times a year, because, when his meds are out of balance, the voices cause him to become both suicidal and homicidal. When Dan's there, for the first part of his stay, he has a constant 1:1 safety sitter, until he can be trusted not to hurt himself, or attack the staff, or the other patients. Everyone stays away from him as much as possible while he has a sitter. He might as well be living in the tombs. Because his own pastor isn't allowed to visit him during these times, I've sometimes sat with him while he tells me what's troubling him, and then we have a prayer together. One day I was walking through the unit to see a different patient, and he grabbed my hand and pulled me towards him. "Chaplain!" he yelled, "I wanna pray!" I relaxed then,

and smiled “that’s great, Dan—what do you want to pray about?” He smiled joyfully: “Chaplain, I don’t wanna KILL anybody today!” Yes—I laughed after the fact too, but it’s kind of laughing so you don’t cry.

After Dan’s meds are balanced, he goes back out into the world. I don’t know exactly how he’s integrated into society, or who his friends are. But he does integrate; he has family, and friends a church he attends. Just like the Gerasene demoniac, whom Jesus tells “return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you,” Dan needs to be with his family, and his friends, and his church in order to be his healthiest self. Actually, we all do. Just like we talked about last week, our Trinitarian God lives in loving community with Godself, we also need loving community. We need to be loved and accepted. God has created us precisely for this life in relationship with one another, and with God.

Because of that, we see that Jesus is always about pulling people back into community with God, and with one another. By casting out demons, he allows people to be able to become daughters, and sons, husbands, and mothers once again. By forgiving a prostitute, or a tax collector, he is encouraging them to come back into the community. And he seeks out again and again the marginalized people: the demoniacs, the tax collectors, the poor, the beggars, the lepers. He shows us that, in some ways, these people on the margins of the Jewish community are the ones who need God the most. And then, in today’s epistle, we hear Paul say that we need to be even more inclusive than that. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.” Friends, this was radical for Paul to say. The heirs of God’s promise had always, and only been the Jews. THEY were God’s chosen people, no-one else. For Paul to say that God’s grace was now open to ALL people who followed Jesus was upending the whole system. And no difference in God’s eyes between male and female? That did not fly in a patriarchal society. No wonder the Jewish authorities kept Paul in jail as much as they could.

So if we believe Jesus, and Paul, then WE are called to welcome, love, and accept all people. Rich and poor, gay and straight, liberal and conservative, sick and well, annoying and delightful. God created ALL of us in God’s image. Some people, like the demoniac in today’s lesson, or like Dan, might seem impossible to welcome and to integrate, but with God’s help WE can show radical, loving hospitality to everyone.  
Amen

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