

6-22-24 Sermon – “Discharging our Demons” – Luke 8:26-39

In the last month or so, several of you have participated in one of our small group Bible studies on Jesus’ parables.

One way that you’re trying to approach the parables is to ask, “Where do you see yourself in this story? With whom do you identify?” Sometimes this helps us twenty-first-century readers find our way into the Biblical world, to find a character whose perspective we might share.

But sometimes this gets us into a strange place. For example, when I read this morning’s Gospel reading - the story of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac, I find myself identifying with...the pigs.

The pigs? Yes, the pigs. Now, I recognize there could be a few...extra-textual reasons for this point of identification. Namely, my current cocktail of hormone injections makes me want to eat everything in sight, so I’m spending a lot of time these days snarfling around the church looking for snacks like a little truffle hog. (In related news, I probably need to replenish Hae Won’s chocolate supply!)

But I think I’m also feeling some sympathy – maybe empathy – for the pigs because they end up taking the fall for something that has absolutely nothing to do with them. A man is possessed by demons, so Jesus casts them out. But the demons negotiate with Jesus; they say, “Please don’t send us back into the abyss – how about we go inhabit that herd of pigs over there?” And for some reason, Jesus says, “Sure, take the pigs.” When the demons enter the pigs, they rush into the lake and drown. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The pigs bear the brunt of a burden that is not theirs to bear – something I imagine all of us have experienced at one point or another. And it’s a little troubling that Jesus is ok with all this – that he lets the demons do their damage on the herds, seemingly without any regard for the lives of the pigs or the livelihoods of the swineherds.

If the pigs pose a problem for modern day readers, the demons pose a bigger one. It was common practice in Jesus’ time to attribute physical and mental afflictions to evil spirits, but that’s not the way we see the world anymore. We who live in a world of modern medicine and psychology often decide we have no need for the category of the demonic.

Then again...maybe it’s not so foreign to us. We may not understand them in quite the same way as first-century readers, but we know a thing or two about demons, don’t we? Forces in our world, often beyond our control, that swirl around us and within us, bringing out the worst of human nature. Resentment, jealousy, white supremacy, addiction, misogyny, xenophobia, greed... Perhaps we are not the strangers we think we are to demonic possession.

You know...it’s interesting. The gospels are full of exorcisms, stories where Jesus casts demons out of suffering people. But in none of the others do the demons look for somewhere else to go after they’ve been cast out.

The more I think about it, though, the more it makes sense. *Of course* demons need somewhere to go after they’ve been cast out! It’s the law of conservation: Energy can neither be created nor destroyed. If it’s going out of something, it’s going *into* something else. Our demons are not *eliminated* so much as they are, perhaps, *discharged*.

This week, we’ve been working on electrical repairs and upgrades at the church. One of the issues they fixed was related to *grounding* – that third wire that serves as a kind of “escape route” if something or goes wrong in the system, directing the electrical charge back down into the earth.

Grounding is important because if we *don't* have that built-in discharge system, the electricity will choose its own discharge escape route, and we probably won't like the path it chooses. It might choose the wood...or the pipes... or Mark's hand, when he goes to turn off the lights to the sanctuary on Christmas Eve!!

Maybe...maybe it's the same with our demons. Excess energy needs an escape route. It can be a grounding wire...or Mark's hand...or a herd of pigs. But a demon that's been cast out needs somewhere to go. Our demons will not be eliminated; they must be discharged.

Friends, we have *so much* swirling around inside us right now, don't we? I do not think it's an overstatement to say that we are *possessed* by the realities we are living through. Fear, scarcity, tribalism...now possibly war. And Just like the Gerasene demoniac, it is not just *one* demon that possesses us. No, call us Legion, for there are *many* forces vying for our allegiance, laying claims upon our lives, directing us toward destruction and despair.

If all that energy and emotion keeps swirling around inside of us, it can begin to destroy us. Our demons *will* devour us from the inside out. We too will find ourselves driven out into the wilderness, keeping company with the tombs.

The good news of the story, friends, is that Jesus Christ has the power to cast out our demons. But the caveat is that they need somewhere to go. And if we're not intentional about this, we run the risk of discharging our demons all over one another. We fixed our electricity – and that's really good! But how do we, who live in a world that is *so* highly charged – emotionally and politically – how do we avoid giving each other that same kind of jolt and shock? How do we discharge our demons in a healthy, loving, or at least non-destructive way?

Friends, I must pause here, because I can go no further without a confession: I'm not very good at this. Preachers are often reminded that we preach first and foremost to ourselves, and this week that is 110% true. If you've spent time with me recently, you've probably witnessed my demons discharging themselves all *over* the place! As my friend's 4-year-old likes to say, "Aunt Ginna's a hot mess!" Maybe you are too, some days.

So I stand before you today, not as an expert, but as Exhibit A, asking the question: How *do* we discharge our demons in ways that do good rather than harm?

I do not pretend to know the answer. But I'll tell you a few things I've seen.

Last Saturday, I saw a bunch of y'all on the Paseo – holding signs, waving flags, singing, chanting, cheering. Some of your dogs were even decked out for the occasion! And I can't help but think: Perhaps *that* is one of the ways we discharge our demons. Exercising our constitutional right to peaceful assembly and protest.

I've seen others of you cooking meals for the NEST homeless shelter. And in those chemical reactions, as you bake and sauté, I wonder if the energy that's transformed is not just physical and chemical, but also...spiritual. Perhaps in the fire of an oven or stovetop, demons are discharged and transformed into acts of loving service.

I've seen you serve at food pantries and elementary schools, seen you tend the garden or balance budgets or clean out closets or direct backhoes. And I wonder if these activities are like a spiritual grounding wire, giving all that energy swirling around inside us not back into the earth or into a herd of pigs, but back to God.

For friends, hear the good news: the grace of God has the power to transform our demons into things that are loving and beautiful and good. We worship a God who brings life out of death, love out of hate, justice out of injustice. Looking into the face of Jesus Christ, even a legion of demons loses its power to stand. Evil can be transformed into good.

I wish I could tell you how this works. But all I can tell you is that I know it does. That, in Christ's grace, we have the power to write a new ending to this story.

The pigs will surely thank us. And maybe the world will, too. Amen.