

Sermon for June 19, 2016

Today's Gospel reading sounds strange to those of us living in the 21st century. In fact we may picture images from the horror movies that we know such as *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring*. Demons are just in the imaginations of fantasy writers and those who are unenlightened, right? They aren't entities that we struggle with like Jesus does in our Gospel writings.

And yet all the demons that Jesus confronts have three things in common. They cause self-destructive behavior in the victim. The victim feels trapped in that condition. And they separate the victim from normal living within their family. That wouldn't happen to sound familiar to anyone here today, would it? Don't most of us suffer from many of the same burdens?

If we define "demons" as those forces which have captured us and prevented us from becoming who God intended us to be; then yes we are surrounded by and even possessed by as many demons as those whom Jesus encountered. Our demons can be of many kinds: mental illness, addictions, envy, jealousy, destructive habits and our own possessions. Or we could name our demons in another way as we named them in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism as the forces that defy God, the powers in the world that rebel against God and the ways of sin that draw us away from God.

There are more similarities between this man's demon possession and our own. He was totally cut off from family and society living in the tombs and in the wilds separated from normal people and normal living. Don't many of us who

have a problem separate ourselves from family and friends out of guilt, or shame or fear?

The demons were causing the man to hurt himself and no amount of heavy chain could contain him. Aren't most of our problems self-destructive and keep us bound? Don't we need to hit rock bottom before we seek any help from others either telling ourselves that we don't have a problem or that we can handle it on our own, keeping us bound?

When Jesus asks the man his name the demon answers for him telling Jesus his name is Legion for there were many demons. Don't we too realize that once we think we have one problem under control another one is right there with it? And maybe this is why we need these stories in the Bible; to show us that only the power of God can cast out demons.

Any one who is involved with any twelve step program knows that this is the key to its success. The first three steps are: We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand God.

Alcoholism is a terrible problem in the former Soviet Union. Before the collapse of the former USSR, officials appealed to American AA members to help them set up AA groups. However because the USSR was officially atheist, they wanted these first three steps to be omitted. The Americans refused, stating that

those three steps are basic to their program. We need God to free us from our demons.

But we realize too that we also need the support of the people around us. In almost all of Jesus' stories of healing, there is restoration of the healed person to their family and community. For that same healing today we need the support and fellowship of our family, our congregation and the whole community. Becoming free from our demons is rarely a "do-it-yourself" project. We need help—God's and that of others—every day.

Martin Luther suffered greatly from what we would call depression. He called it attacks from the devil. When he would feel an attack coming on he would shout as loud as he could to the devil, "I am baptized!" He didn't shout I'm a Christian or I believe in Jesus, no it was "I am baptized!" His confidence was centered not on his faith or beliefs, but on an act of God's pure grace—God's claim on his life given in baptism. Water and the Word of God combine to claim us as sons and daughters of the living God. We are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever! No amount of demons can take that away from us. God has come down to us and claimed us as God's own.

Luther calls us to remember our baptism everyday; especially as we struggle everyday with our demons. In the waters of baptism we are clothed with Christ. In the bread and the wine of Holy Communion we are strengthened and nourished with Christ's body and blood for not only our struggles of the day, but also to proclaim all that God has done for us! For the story today doesn't end with the man being healed; he is also restored to his community and charged by Jesus to

proclaim all that God has done for him and he does! To whom are you going to
proclaim today all that God has done for you?