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Luke 8:26-39
“Silencing Legion”

Too much happens in today’s gospel story. Jesus and the disciples take a boat across the Sea of Galilee to Gentile territory, where they encounter a troubled man, a demon-possessed man – naked, alone, living among the caves and tombs of a hillside cemetery. He is healed by Jesus, which oddly strikes fear into people’s hearts, so that they tell Jesus to get back in his boat and leave them alone. When I’ve shared this story before, some people have fixated on the oddest detail – they worry about the pigs that drowned in the lake. Let’s be clear: this gospel lesson is not about the pigs. You don’t interrupt the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears to ask what punishment she risked for breaking and entering, nor do you derail the telling of Hansel and Gretel by insisting that a witch’s house made of candy would have melted in the sun or been covered by ants and thus quite unappetizing. Likewise, in this story I’m sorry about the pigs, but that’s not the image I want you to focus on.

Focus instead on this: When the townspeople ran to the scene, they found the troubled man clothed, in his right mind, and seated at the feet of Jesus. To be seated at Jesus’ feet meant the man was in the posture of a disciple, a student attentive and ready to learn from his master. No chains, shackles, or screaming – simply a man silent and attentive to the word of Jesus.

We don’t know the man’s real name. When Jesus asked who he was, he replied, “Legion,” which was a military term for a Roman squadron of 6,000 troops. The bible says that many demons had entered this man. I need to confess up front – I do and I don’t believe in demons. I believe in evil – evil spirits, addictions, delusions that can destroy human life. I don’t believe in evil that has a personality and intentionality, evil that can be called a demon with an independent existence, a face, a mind, and a plan to trip us up so that we will fall. I believe in spirits of evil that take over individual hearts and lead people to horrible acts. I believe spirits of evil possess mobs and lead them to murder, lynch, crucify or destroy others who are innocent. But I don’t believe, to borrow Flip Wilson’s old phrase, “that the devil made me do it.” There is enough darkness in the human heart and brokenness in the human world to bear responsibility for the evil within and around us.

Throughout this gospel story, Legion is the main character. Legion is the name for whatever had driven this man out of his right mind – something medical, emotional, spiritual, psychological; who knows. It had made him an absolute outcast – without clothing, without family; chained and shackled, abandoned and alone; barely human. But being possessed by Legion need not always be so dramatic. Legion can also be our name when relentless worries keep us awake at night, or scars from abuse and broken relationships throb like unhealed wounds on our soul. To put it simply: If we are called to

love God with all our heart, mind and strength, then Legion is the demonic name of the 6,000 daily details and demands that distract us from God. That too is Legion.

Realize that Legion wasn't only out in the cemetery. Legion was also rampant in the city. The community knew about this poor man; they had invested a lot of time and resources into dealing with him – keeping him under guard, binding him with chains and shackles. They had found a way to live with demons right outside the city wall; they had found a way to sleep at night even with Legion howling from the cemetery every evening.¹ Just as we sleep every night despite choosing to put a significant portion of our population behind bars when they could be treated far more justly and humanely elsewhere. Just as we sleep every night despite having no real solution to the spread of nuclear weapons and threat of nuclear war, no real solution to our self-destructive addiction to fossil fuels, no real alternative to economic structures that encourage food wastage and water pollution in a world decimated by starvation, dehydration and premature death.

We learn how to live with demons, even with legions of demons. Which is why, when Jesus healed the man, the people were angry and afraid. They were angry, ostensibly because Jesus had sent the demons into the pigs and thus destroyed the swineherders' livelihood. It is similar to when Luke later tells the story in the book of Acts about how Paul once cured a slave-girl who had been possessed by a demon that gave her the gift of fortune-telling, and her owners got mad because they'd lost their ability to profit off this poor girl; and so they threw Paul into jail.² Someone always profits off the demons in our midst – the demons of drug addiction, sex trafficking, out of control consumerism, or building casinos supposedly as a way to fund our schools. We exert so much energy adapting ourselves to the demons within us and around us, that we're afraid to imagine what it might be like not to be demon-possessed. We're hesitant to imagine what it would be like to be able to trust God with all our heart, mind, and strength. So we find ways to chase Jesus back to his boat and send him away, back across the sea.

Come back to the image I asked you earlier to focus on – the man sitting in his right mind, quietly, at the feet of Jesus. On that day, the man called Legion gained salvation. Salvation is something holistic – it involves your body, mind, and spirit. It comes when we silence Legion and lovingly focus our attention on Christ. As Frederick Buechner has said, when you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. You give of yourself, and by all the rules of arithmetic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. But in a curious paradox, there is more; and you discover who you truly are at last.³

In Mitch Albom's well-known book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, there is a compelling anecdote about how the psychiatrist Morrie Schwarz was given a grant to observe how mental patients were being treated. Morrie saw patients who screamed all day and cried all night; who soiled themselves, starved themselves, and had to be restrained, if not with chains, then with modern cloth restraints. One patient, a middle-aged woman, used to come out of her room every day and lay facedown on the tile floor, staying there for hours, as doctors and nurses stepped around her. Morrie watched in horror and took

notes. Every day she did the same thing, laid on the floor, talking to no one, ignored by everyone. He began to sit on the floor with her, even lay down alongside her, trying to draw her out of her misery. Eventually he got her to sit up and even return to her room. Mostly what she wanted was the same thing we all want – someone to notice she was there.⁴

The man formerly named Legion sat at Jesus' feet, lovingly, attentive, and begged to follow Jesus as one of his disciples. Jesus received him as a disciple, but said these words to him: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you" (Luke 8:39). Remember those instructions. If the man had left with Jesus, the townspeople would still have been captive to their own Legion of demons. They would have stayed stuck in their status quo – accommodating themselves to the brokenness in their midst, taking sleeping pills and using ear plugs to not hear those who scream at night; locking doors and passing laws to convince themselves that evil is safely being kept at bay; continuing to make money off misery and staying so comfortably distracted by the details of the day that they never, fully, love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, and strength. And so they never silence Legion long enough to sit at Jesus' feet.

But at Jesus' insistence, the clothed, healed man returned to their midst. He wasn't conveniently banished to the cemetery on the hill. For Morrie Schwarz, she was no longer the crazy woman who you stepped over as she laid in the hallway. They had names. They had regained their humanity. These stories of healings and salvation are all around us. They are often our own stories, if we too are willing to declare how much God has done for us. Do you truly want to save the world? Then save the man called Legion. Save the woman, save the child who are wounded and despairing in your midst. Communal restoration is always linked with individual healing and salvation.⁵

Earlier two children were baptized right here. The first question of the sacrament liturgy is this: Do you reject the power of evil and renounce the ways of sin that separate you from God? It's one way of saying: Do you walk away from Legion and walk toward Christ? Will you seek to be silent, to listen at the Master's feet, and then return home to declare how much God has done for you? Yes, a lot happened in this gospel story. But if we do that much, it will be enough. Truly enough. Thanks be to God.

¹ Cf. Fred Craddock, *Luke Interpretation commentary series*, p. 117.

² Acts 16:16-24

³ Frederick Buechner, "Salvation", *Wishful Thinking*, p. 103.

⁴ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 109-110.

⁵ David Lose, *Feasting on the Word*, Luke 8:26-39, Homiletical Perspective, p. 171.