

## SERMON, ST. JOHN'S PROPER 7, JUNE 19, 2022

This Gospel story of Jesus in the land of the Gerasenes is a strange and interesting one. In the previous scene, Jesus inexplicably tells his disciples to sail to the other side of the Sea of Galilee: "Let's go to the other side of the lake," which begs the question, "Why?" While crossing, he falls asleep, while a massive storm sweeps down on the lake and the disciples have to wake Jesus up to calm the storm, which he does by rebuking the wind and the raging waves. There is a sweet calm and they continue on their merry way. What we may not realize is that in ancient Israel, the Jews not being a seafaring people, the waters of the sea represented primeval chaos and a storm at sea the forces of evil. Jesus' rebuke of the storm is, in fact, an exorcism of demons! So, it's not surprising that when they get to the land of the Gerasenes on the other side, he continues this work by exorcising the demoniac who lives among the tombs. This is quite a rich and vivid scene, one of the most fascinating and even cinematic in the Gospels!

Several things stand out in this story. This man is as wretched as you can possibly imagine and as ritually unclean from the orthodox Jewish perspective as you can get. First of all the land of the Geresenes is gentile territory, as indicated by the very presence of a herd of pigs, the most unclean of all animals, and consorting with gentiles rendered a Jew unclean. By the way, first century Palestine was very culturally diverse with Greek and Roman colonies, such as the Decapolis, Neapolis and Tiberias, so widespread across the landscape that Jews were probably already a minority in their own land. Needless to say, the guy is naked and nudity was an abomination among the Jews and the tombs of the dead, where this man lived, were highly unclean. And his madness was not for the people of that time a "morally neutral" condition of mental illness, but signified profound evil, the presence and activity of demons. Jesus was placing himself, from the religious point of view, in a ritually very dangerous situation. It seems that, by asking his disciples to sail to "the other side," Jesus was deliberately making a determined effort to place himself in an inconceivably dangerous situation, one that was tantamount to spiritual suicide for a practicing Jew. But there's more...Biblical scholars point to the fascinating symbolism of the demoniac's name: Legion. That he willingly gave his name is significant in itself because in ancient times it was believed that if you possessed the name of a person, you could maintain power and control over them. This was such a powerful part of California Indian culture, for example, that one never gave one's true name to a stranger. So the demoniac is giving over his power to Jesus, offering his life to the Lord, in itself highly symbolic. And notice, too, that the demon-possessed man, who represents so viscerally the "Other" to the Jewish people, actually recognizes who Jesus is, "the Son of the Living God," unlike Jesus's own people. But there's even more! The name Legion itself is significant because we know that a Roman legion was stationed in this district whose standard featured the emblem of a boar, a pig! Jesus enters not only a ritually unclean territory, but the politically dangerous space of the occupying power, the power that would eventually have the authority to nail him to the Cross.

So, Jesus casts out the demons, who beg Jesus to send them into the herd of swine, which then rushes headlong down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. The evil spirits enter

the unclean pigs, which dive into the primeval chaos, the symbolic abyss. A dramatic story with a seemingly happy ending, though I confess to feeling sorry for those pigs and the swineherd who depended on them for a living! Perhaps it isn't so strange that the people of that country wanted to get rid of Jesus, who after all, was threatening their livelihood!

But truthfully, the real heart of this story lies in the fact that Jesus was determined to go to the other side of the lake, to the land of the gentiles, the undesirables, the unclean. And why would he, a good Jew, want to place himself in such ritual danger? The truth is that the real miracle of this story is not the casting out of the demons of the Geresene madman, but Jesus' revolutionary embrace of the "other," and the "other's" embrace of him. This is, indeed, what makes Jesus stand out among all religious teachers: in so many ways, it seems that he came to break down the barriers that constitute so much of "religion" down the ages. My former parishioner at All Souls, Berkeley, the renowned sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah, author of the best-selling book "Habits of the Heart," claimed that it was in tribalism that religion had its origins. People projected a powerful deity as the totem of their tribe who would blow away the deities of their enemies, who were essentially competitors for the same hunting grounds. Religion, he says, started out as a "my God is bigger, better and more powerful than your God," kind of thing. So, your God will be blown out of the water by my God and we can take your resources. Moreover, the idea evolved that the practices of other people are false, evil and unclean and only our practices bring life and abundance. Eventually, of course, this developed into the idea that the Gods of other people, and indeed, the people themselves, need to be eliminated as a kind of contagion, a cancer, in this world. We can't have peace and harmony unless the dissonance of difference is eliminated from the face of the earth.

Jesus defied religious convention - indeed, he defied much of all that would eventually pass as "Christian" all through history, by fully embracing the "other." I would say that, it was his flouting of religious convention, along with his defiance of the Roman political order that sent him to the cross. He included and consorted with women, foreigners, even Roman centurions, notorious sinners, tax-collectors, heretics, crazy people, lepers - the list goes on and on. In fact, sometimes, when I think of his infinitely universal ministry and his life given because of his defiance of traditional "religiosity", I find it difficult to give the label of "religion" at all to the revolutionary movement he started. The Christian community actually started off pretty well. You may be surprised to learn that the earliest Christians, most of whom were still Jews, had a hard time accepting non-Jews into the church, unless it was on their terms. To be a Christian, they said, you had to be a good Jew: dietary laws, Sabbath observance, circumcision etc. It was Peter who stood up at an important council in Jerusalem to insist that the way of Christ was a big tent that included both Jews and gentiles. Gentiles didn't have to become Jews and Jews didn't have to be gentiles, but all sorts and conditions of people were to be embraced in the big tent that is the Body of Christ. And remember Paul's stunning words, so counter-intuitive to the tribalism of much of religion: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you belong to Christ." Wow, that's the big tent!

Need I remind you that we're all living in "cloud cuckoo land" if we believe that the Church has lived up to its calling to be the big tent down the ages. It's been persecution, conflict, mayhem, and death to those who dare to be different all through Christian history. Tribalism has ruled the day as we've hounded and destroyed those "heretics," "unbelievers," "sinners," and

simply anyone who dared to disagree or be different in the name of Jesus. There are, however, signs of hope including here at St. John's, where inclusivity in the Name of Christ is at the core of your understanding, proclamation and living out the Gospel. This has been a great source of joy to me this past year. I think of the blindness to race, cultural background, gender and sexuality in this place. I saw it in the beautiful signs of hope that we've recently seen in our community that we can joyfully live under Christ's big tent and have significant political differences, even learn to understand why in heaven's name anyone would choose to be a Democrat or choose to be a Republican. After all, Jesus was of the party that I voted for! I saw the openheartedness of the St John's community last week in the audible gasp in this congregation when I mentioned that there are some in the wider Church who are trying to restrict communion only to those who are baptized. Don't get me wrong, Episcopalians have not always behaved well, in fact, we've often been exclusionary to a vile degree racially, politically and socially. However, at our best, the Gospel of the Big Tent that includes a broad variety of perspectives (and none at all) and all types and conditions of people, has been our strong suit. This must be a safe place for all, not where we attempt to make people just like us, but where we rejoice in our differences, learn from one another, and proclaim and live out the universal Gospel of Jesus, the Good News of compassionate love. Like him, we are called to cross the waters of chaos to enter that strange land of the "Other" to cast out the demons of hatred, tribalism and separation.