

1 Kings 19: 1-4, 8-15a
Galatians 3: 23-29
Luke 8: 26-39
5 Pentecost, Proper 7

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“No Longer Demons”

I want to wish all the fathers here today a very Happy Father’s Day. If you have ever wondered who to thank for this day associated with interesting neck ties and socks, it was a very thoughtful church-going woman, who was moved by a Mother’s Day sermon she heard in Spokane Washington in 1910, Mother’s Day having been launched two years earlier in 1908 in West Virginia, and she proposed equal time for dads. Oddly enough it only took six years to have Mother’s Day declared a national holiday, in 1914, while it took sixty-two years to have Father’s Day officially declared a national holiday by President Nixon in 1972. So, you can thank or blame either that nice church lady in Spokane or President Nixon; it’s your choice. Moreover, it once was the case that Mother’s Day recorded the most long-distance telephone calls of the year while Father’s Day brought about the most collect phone calls of the year. Go figure. Of course, today, one gets a text or an e-mail if one is lucky. Sometimes I suspect that fathers love their children more by what they don’t say than by what they do say and sometimes that favor is returned.

I don’t really think that we heard about a demonically possessed man in our Gospel reading because today is Father’s Day. That must be a coincidence. Or maybe not. Fathers, in our popular culture have a mixed persona. While we still claim that Father knows best, many a TV show has portrayed fathers as bumbling idiots being ordered about by their wives and children. Dads are often portrayed as bad guys or losers or hopelessly inept or just plain absent. One wonders if any Dad ever gets it right. Sometimes it does seem like trying to meet every expectation that society has for Dads would indeed make you crazy. So maybe the coincidence is intentional – being a Dad today can make you crazy.

Our story of the demoniac is rich with symbols and inside jokes and references. Jesus is “on the other side” away from Jewish lands but still inside the limits of the Roman Empire. Strange things are expected to happen in strange lands so the fact that Jesus immediately runs into a man filled with demons would surprise no one in Judea – all of those other people – the ones who live – over there – we know that they are all crazy. The demoniac, of course, knows precisely who Jesus is – Son of the Most High God because demons know the spiritual world whereas humans are limited, generally, to knowing only this world. All those demons sense God’s presence and all those demons are deeply afraid of God’s justice being imposed on them.

The interchange about names would make sense to the original audience because to know the name of another is to have power over that person. Curses and imprecations work best if they are personalized. Even today, in a world of endless selfies and self-promotion, there are people who do not wish to have their name known or their photo taken. But Jesus gets the name of this den of demons. The original audience would have gasped at the dangerous, edgy joke of calling this den of demons – “Legion.” That’s a Roman military term. It refers to a 6,000 member unit of The Imperial Roman Army. It was the Roman Legions that dominated the world and controlled

all of Judea and beyond. And the edgy, political joke gets worse because Jesus doubles down and sends the demons into pigs who then lemming-like promptly leap into the Sea of Galilee. No wonder the people are seized with great fear. And no wonder the healed man wishes to stay with Jesus. Not only does he owe total loyalty to Jesus but also the man is likely to be safer with Jesus than on his own. Because of this healing, the man should be reunited with his community but now this same man is indelibly linked to a scurrilous story about Roman soldiers as demons and pigs. Those Gospels are very political, like it or not.

Most of us don't really believe in demons these days. We are far more likely to understand odd behavior as psychological or medical problems. Notions of demonic possession sound like old horror movies or stories of Puritan New England. We don't burn people at the stake anymore. Or so we claim.

Yet many people read their horoscopes and act accordingly. People seek non-traditional cures from all sorts of characters, read Tarot cards, attend séances, drink snake oil smoothies, and accept highly dubious claims as Gospel truth because they want and need to believe in them. And we are remarkably fond these days of making some people into demons. We make wildly inflated generalizations about large groups of people by calling them derogatory terms and imputing all sorts of terrible motives to them without any evidence at all. We lap up conspiracy theories that claim amazingly complicated stories are literally true. It is routinely claimed, in some circles that a handful of people – always from somewhere else and thus foreigners, actually run the whole world in some secret nefarious plot to do us in. And, no, I am not talking about the Federal government. We are told that aliens have existed and do exist and currently live among us. “Men in Black” was a documentary. And given some of the people we see on nightly TV, that one has become very plausible. How else could we explain the Kardashians? Or Carrot-Top?

We demonize all the time. When we do, we make the “other” far more powerful, far more dangerous so as to drive us into hating and fearing them and then, having given them fearsome powers, we make those others responsible for all that can go wrong. And we do that so we are not responsible for our own sins. When we make demons, we let ourselves off the hook for what we do that is sinful and wrong. “The devil made me do it” is a cop-out. It is true that the devil might say – “you look really good when you sin like that” but we choose to do what we do. There is always one moment when we can turn away from committing sin. We can say no; we can stop. We can change. We can point out what the Emperor is really wearing. Yes, it is hard to do. Yes, it can ruin a career or end a life. But it can be done; it has been done; it must be done. And why is that?

Because there are demons in the world. There are evil people who seek control and domination for bad purposes. There are selfish people who seek pleasure and wealth and ease for themselves and happily deny the same to others. There are careless people who think the world revolves around them. There are callous people who have given up trying to build communities and despair of anything ever changing. There are manipulative people in the world who whisper vile things in charming voices, who play on our uncertainties and our unknowing. There are clever people who think this is all some sort of game and they want to be the winner and will do and say anything to win. There are tired people who are so stressed that they stop thinking at all.

So, our baptismal covenant demands that we call out the demons that reside within us and command them to leave us; to end their persistent fear-mongering and their desire to divide and pit us against our better selves. It is not easy to do that. The demons we have raised ourselves or those we have inherited from our families and communities are very persistent. They are our own chains and shackles and they are strong and tough. But we can call our demons out; we can break those chains. And once we have drawn out our own demons, and not one moment before we have done that demanding, hard work, then we can turn our efforts to drawing out the demons in others.

Let the words of Saint Paul guide us in this work. “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 are one in Christ Jesus.” We are no longer demons; we are children of one God, redeemed by Christ Jesus. Amen.