

You Are Who You Are

Luke 8:26-29
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First Presbyterian Church
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In his book titled “Stopping,” David Kundtz tells about his childhood listening to the radio show “The Shadow.” “The part of the program that I remember vividly,” says Kundtz, “is the beginning with the scary music and a man’s deep, sinister voice asking, “What evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!” Kundtz then quotes Alexander Sol-zhen-it-syn, a Russian dissident and novelist, saying, “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil,” he says, “cuts through the heart of every human being.” Kundtz goes on to quote M. Scott Peck, saying, The “central defect of evil is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it.”

Knowing that evil “cuts through the heart of every human being” and that the worst thing we can do is fail to acknowledge it – that’s the core message today’s story about Jesus and the Demoniac.

In today’s New Testament lesson, Luke tells us that Jesus arrives at the country of Ger-asenes and as he steps out on land, “a man of the city who had demons (meets) him. For a long time (the man) had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.” The man was “kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.”

It’s quite a description – someone possessed by demons, doing crazy things, only making matters worse for himself. And for years and years, nobody could make a difference, make things better. We don’t tend to think in terms of demonic possession, except in scary movies. And yet, we can all relate to times in our lives when we’ve done crazy things, crazy things that, left unchecked, lead to nothing good. Just a cycle of misguided choices and an area of life that’s beyond our control.

We can all relate to that. Even the Apostle Paul could relate to that, saying, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want ... it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” (Romans 7:15-20)

Yes, we’ve all felt gripped by sin, stuck in self-defeating patterns, possessed by a demon so to speak beyond our control. Maybe there’s a part of your life now that has you feel that way. It’s not uncommon, if you think about it for a moment having a trouble spot in life. Think about it. Whatever that trouble-spot is for you – health; finances, a troubling relationship, time management, household clutter, mental clutter – whatever it is that’s out of control for you, there is a solution.

The first thing to do is put the trouble area in proper perspective. We see this in the story of Jesus and the Demoniac where it says, “A man of the city ... had a demon....”

Right there, we see a key insight into changing our perspective about that trouble area in life. When struggling with any frustrating, hopeless problem, it's important to remember that you are not the problem. Rather, you have a problem, just like the man had a demon. And problems have solutions.

So many people go through life thinking that they are the problem. No. You are not the problem. You are a child of God living in a fallen world. And as such, we all struggle with problems that take on a life of their own. When Jesus met the man who had a demon, he saw the man, apart from his problem. Jesus saw beyond the man's problem, and he knew there was a solution. Well, the same is true for us. Jesus will never look at you and see only your weaknesses, your trouble areas. No, Jesus sees you as a child of God, a beautiful part of God's creation.

There is no shame in being a fallible, misguided human being. That's kind of the definition of who we are – children of God but also children of the Fall, the Fall of Adam and Eve. It's important to accept yourself as a fallible, misguided human being who is nonetheless loved and cherished by God. There's power in that, power to change things for the better.

We see that when the man first lays eyes on Jesus. Luke tells us, “... He fell down before him” and the demon inside “shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?’” You see, it's OK to fall at the feet of Jesus in despair, even if part of you doesn't want to. We've all been there.

Or if you haven't, it's not a bad place to be – laying your problems at the feet of Jesus – even as hard as it is to do. Take for example the minister who was driving downtown to see a show, and he's stopped for speeding. The state trooper smells alcohol on his breath, and then sees an empty wine bottle on the floor. “Sir, have you been drinking?” “Just water,” says the minister. “Then why do I smell wine?” asks the trooper. The minister looks down at the bottle and says, “Good Lord, he's done it again!” Water into wine. Now that's a clergyman with a problem – and not just a drinking problem. He's got a denial problem.

When we take the difficult step of laying our problem before Jesus, honestly and in humility, we tap into a power greater than ourselves, a power able to guide us to the solution, to a new way of being. Once you've laid the problem at the feet of Jesus, the next step is to somehow separate yourself from that area of life, put some distance between you and that problem area, or the trigger that leads to nothing good.

When the man with the demon fell at the feet of Jesus, Jesus “commanded the unclean spirit to come out....” Jesus has authority and power to separate you from any unclean spirit that has ahold of you, any pattern of life that isn't working for you. Put yourself and your life in the hands of Jesus, and follow his direction.

Maybe this means hanging out with different people, or not going to certain places, starting a new daily routine, stepping up in a new way – even when you don't want to. Whatever it is, you know what would make a difference for you. Put yourself in Jesus hands and just do it. Just do it. It's just that easy, isn't it? No. It's not. And we see that where Luke says it was "many times (that the demon) had seized (the man)," and many times he "would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds."

Part of dealing with a troubling problem is trying and failing, trying and failing. And yet, trying and failing doesn't make you a failure. It doesn't mean you can't succeed. It doesn't mean you have no power to change things; that things can't get better. Yes, you are who you are, but God is who God is. God is a life-giving God, ready and able to give you a new lease on life in that problem area of yours.

Luke tells us, "The demons begged Jesus to let them enter (into) a large herd of (pigs), ... so (Jesus) gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man...."

We see here that sometimes what it takes to overcome that problem area in life is to give yourself permission to walk away from it, to change how you always react, to get help seeing a new way of being, a new way of responding.

Remember, you are not the problem. You have a problem. And Jesus is here to help. His desire is that you be set free from that which binds you. Jesus gives you permission to do things differently. Why not give yourself that same permission? You might just be surprised at how things improve.

For the man with the demon, after he gave his problem over to Jesus and found there the power and freedom to change, the man was "found ... sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind."

What a joy and comfort it is to be seated at the feet of Jesus, clothed by his grace and mercy, basking in the Spirit of new life. That is the story of Jesus and the Demoniak. And in many ways, it is your story, too – my story, too – as we finally come to lay our troubles before the Lord, and there discover a power and hope we otherwise would never have seen, the power of Jesus to guide us to new hope and new life. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Divine Companion, from beginning to end, we rest in your embrace, though we do not always acknowledge or recognize your presence.

All along our days you journey with us. Sometimes you come to us through a loud shout that helps us heed your call. Sometimes you are a quiet whisper that helps us to listen.

Like the best father ever, you help shape our questions and are patient with our answers. You are full of compassion and care like a loving grandfather. You love us tenderly like a parent cradling a child. You give us visions to soar like the eagle.

Like a wise doctor, you heal our troubled souls with a gentle touch. O God, how wonderful you are.

How good it is to be in your presence. We bring to you our whole life – our joy and our grief, our patience and our worry, our dreams and our despair.

We are thankful for your presence in our lives, and for your healing, supportive presence in the lives of those we care for in prayer, compassion and support.

We pray your Spirit of healing and wellness upon all those we keep in prayer, and especially Bud Dickinson, Jennifer Roe Rankin, Leo Bray, John Foster, and Will Ratcliff ...

We pray all this in confidence of your tender mercy and your power to heal. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**