

Bound to Sin

Luke 8:26-39

Second Sunday after Pentecost, (June 23) 2019

Years ago *People* magazine did a poll among its readers on the subject of sin. They published the results in an article called “Sindex: A Readers Guide to Misbehavior” which gave a ranking to sins from the least to the greatest in the eyes of their readers. The top five worst sins were murder, rape, incest, sex abuse, and spying against your country. The least severe sin in their ranking was recording TV shows (which dates the poll) and nude sunbathing. Interesting that capital punishment was ranked eleven from the bottom but tattling was ranked thirteen. Calling in sick when you’re not was higher than viewing pornography, and cutting in line was higher than mercy killing. Parking in a handicap zone was worse than killing to protect your property. Readers said they believed they committed between 4 to 5 sins a month (*People*, Feb. 10, 1986).

An amusing list. Also instructive. Nowhere in the article, the polling, and the ranking is there any other understanding of sin being anything other than specific actions we do. The assumption is that sins are particular moral infractions. Hence, sin is usually written for us in the lower case and often as plural “sins.”

Today’s story from Luke 8 gives us a completely different understanding of Sin. Biblical Sin is usually upper case. It is bigger than our individual actions. It is social and communal, corporate. Sin in the Bible is systemic. The old term we rarely use anymore is original sin. It results in specific sinful actions but in the Bible, those specific actions are not the primary focus.

Jesus and his disciples cross over the Sea of Galilee to the southeast side in what is called the land of the Gerasenes in Luke and Mark, while Matthew refers to the area by the name of its largest town, Gadara – the land of the Gadarenes. This was the area also known as the Decapolis, for ten towns that were mostly Greek speaking, not Aramaic. While some Jews lived over there, the overall population was more diverse with mostly Greek speaking Gentiles.

As soon as Jesus gets out of the boat he is met by an obviously tormented man, whom Luke tells us was possessed by demons. Apparently the man is wearing no clothes and Luke gives us some background: instead of living in town or in a house, he lived in the cemetery. When he meets Jesus he falls down before him and starts screaming, “What are you doing to me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?! Please, no longer torment me!” Luke explains, “For Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man” and Luke adds further explanation: the demon or demons overwhelmed this man many times. He had been kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but the man would break the bonds, and be driven by the demons into the wilds.

Jesus asks, “What is your name?” And the man replies, “Legion” and Luke says, “for many demons had entered him.” And they begged Jesus not to send them back into the abyss (Luke 8:26-31).

We’re only part way into the story and already it’s fascinating and even a bit confusing. The grammar is confusing, perhaps intentionally. Are we talking about one demon or multiple demons? Sometimes the language is referring to the man and sometimes to the demons. When Jesus speaks to the man, the demons answer. And the man himself: no clothes, living in the graveyard, an unclean place beyond

the boundaries of decent society. He was out beyond the bounds because the demons drove him out there, and he was likely out there because the townspeople ostracized him. Naked, bruised, bedraggled, scarred, perhaps still in some of the chains and shackles that had tried to hold him – what more fitting description of the man’s condition: chains and shackles and bonds. He was in chains to control him; a sign of being enslaved to something greater than himself.

Now, we’re getting closer to a Biblical and New Testament understanding of Sin. The Apostle Paul said we were enslaved to Sin and Death, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it” (Romans 7:15-20). Or as Flannery O’Connor’s Hazel Motes said, “I was in sin before I ever committed any” (*Wise Blood*). Sin is not something we do as much as it is something we’re in. Sin is something that binds us, shackles us, and keeps us enslaved. No doubt the man lashes out, is violent, crazed, and out of control. It seems that he does things that bring harm to others and to himself, and people are afraid of him. He is guilty of committing what we conventionally understand as specific actions called sins. But these specific actions are part and parcel of his enslavement, his addiction, his possession to something bigger than himself.

This is why we do not categorize people as evil though we might talk about someone caught in evil. At the same time, we hold people accountable, including ourselves for our sins, for our actions. It is why we confess our Sin and sins, and seek forgiveness and why we are humble.

We white American Christians are very naïve about Sin. Even our conservative Fundamentalists friends, who think of themselves as being very

serious about Sin, have a naïve, shallow understanding more in common with *People* magazine's Sindex than with the Bible.

For example, we white American Christians think of sin like racial prejudice: some people judge others by skin color and we don't. But the more biblical view of Sin is more like Racism. No matter whether we are individually prejudiced or not, we are part of a racist system that blinds us to other ways of seeing. We can be basically good and decent individual persons but we are blind and are caught in racism in ways we do not even know.

Let me give a specific, local example. Likely you've seen the video of the local police officer arresting and manhandling the young black women at the pool party. From the white police officer's perspective it is clear cut and obvious. The girls were breaking the law. There are rules; there are laws and his job is to enforce them.

At the same time, from the black girls' perspective, what was going on was one more incident in 400 years of a white male in authority, assaulting, if not sexually assaulting (they were wearing only their swimsuits), young black women, and they were not going to take it anymore.

Knowing we are bound to Sin and Death and we are blind to it, should keep us humble in face of the immense sentimentality of American white Christianity. Flannery O'Connor wrote that sentimental religion is a skipping of the long, hard, arduous process of sin and redemption that we must go through. Instead, O'Connor said, we bypass the hard work of discipleship and goes straight to innocence. It is a form of denial and the lazy person's way of being Christian without struggle and

results in “self-righteousness accompanied by total blindness to one’s own defects” (*Mystery and Manners*, “The Church and the Fiction Writer”).

In other words, although we white American Christians are quick to say, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” quoting the Apostle Paul in Romans 3:23, in practice we tend to believe that means “those” people and not “us.” And we believe that all we need to do is pray for forgiveness and go on, while the truth is we are caught in something deep and profound, enslaved in something large and encompassing, and only humble hard work, deep prayer, and practicing forgiveness and being forgiven with others in community over time will set us free. This is not done in private; it is done in relationship with each other and others. It is done with those who support us but also hold us accountable. It is why it is so important that I have black friends who help me see my blindness.

Jesus asks the man, “What’s your name?” The demons answered, “Legion” meaning there are many of us. Right up front, Jesus calls the man to name what’s going on with him. One of the first steps in dealing with our blindness is to verbalize and name it.

And in this story, how revealing the man/the demons say “Legion.” Just as in English there are several words in Greek for “many” or “plural” or “several” or “numerous” or “countless.” Why Legion? Legion was the term of the primary unit of the Roman army, much like what we might call a battalion or a regiment. A legion was about 5,000 men, made up of 10 cohorts.

Historians know that during this time in the Decapolis, which was sort of an outlying area of Roman control, there had been some rebellion. The local people

were restive. As a result, the Romans had come in and destroyed some of the towns. They “decimated” them, which is the Latin word from the Roman military practice of lining up all the males in town, and executing every tenth one.

It raises the question, what had this man seen or experienced so that the demons called themselves “Legion?” What kind of trauma is going on? Again, remember that his enslavement to Sin was not simply about doing some bad things. It means that he was trapped in a system of Sin, Death, oppression, depression, violence, despair, fear, suspicion, and anger. He was trapped and couldn’t do anything about it on his own.

But he was also responsible – able to respond. He did what he could. He took the first step. When Jesus arrived, he made sure he was there meeting Jesus. Likely, it took enormous effort, perhaps pain and humility, perhaps torment between himself and the demons and the trauma to go face Jesus. Perhaps he knew it would be costly. Healing and change, transformation and redemption are never easy. There are no shortcuts and there is no cheap grace. And perhaps he knew deep down that only someone beyond himself could save him. He knew that he could not save himself, so he went to Jesus. And sure enough this one step proved to be the life-changing step.

I believe there are moments in life when we reach a crossroads. When the heavens part and a ray of light shines down upon us and we know somehow or another that we must make a choice. Another way to put it is by God’s good grace we reach a place of disillusionment – meaning that our illusions are broken; our blindness and denial about what’s real are challenged and changed. And we know intuitively that we are at a place where we must change or continue our slow

suicide. I believe this about each of us as individual persons. I believe this about churches and communities and towns, and I believe this about our society and I believe this about our planet. Standing there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, this man fell to his knees and said to Jesus, “Jesus, you are the Son of God, and I am not. I can’t do this. Please save me. Change me.” Or in the words of the prayer, “Open my eyes that I may see” (see II Kings 6:17).

The new creation in Christ broke through right there.

But new creation is also disruptive. Luke tells us that there was a large herd of pigs nearby on the hillside and the demons begged Jesus to allow them to enter the pigs, which Jesus did allow. Whatever was internalized in the man, ended up driving the entire herd of pigs mad enough that they rushed over the cliff into the lake and drowned.

The pig farmers saw all this and ran into town shouting what had happened. Soon the townsfolk rushed out to see for themselves and when they got to Jesus, they found the previously deranged and demonized man, sitting at the feet of Jesus and his in right mind. “What’s going on here? Who is this man Jesus? What happened to the pigs? We have a pig shipment due to go out tomorrow and what are we going to do now?” It quickly became apparent that Jesus couldn’t stay around. “He’s disrupting our whole way of life. We have a thriving economy selling illegal pigs across the Jordan for the back room restaurants in Jerusalem. Jesus is messing with our money and our way of life, he’s got to go!” So Jesus gets back into the boat to head back across the Sea of Galilee.

Meanwhile, the healed man comes up to Jesus and says, “Jesus, let me come with you. I want to join up.” Instead, Jesus says, “No, I want you to stay here. Go home and tell everyone how much God has done for you.” And Luke concludes by saying that the man returned home telling everyone how much Jesus had done for him.

Often Jesus invites the healed person to come and join with him but here Jesus sends the man back home. I wonder. Did the man need to go make amends and do some forgiving and ask for forgiveness? Being set free from the bondage to sin most always means we have further work to do. When our eyes are opened, we need to sit down with some folk and talk it out.

I’ve mentioned before that Clarence Jordan thought about this. Clarence was the New Testament scholar and Baptist preacher and founder of Koinonia, the cooperative interracial farm in South Georgia in the 40’s and 50’s and 60’s who resisted the Klan and the White Citizens’ Council. Clarence wondered if this man could have been the source of Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son over in Luke 15? It is something to think about.

The prodigal son ran off to a far country – could have been the Decapolis. He ended up blowing all of his money so he was forced to slop hogs to survive – which would have been the worst thing imaginable for a Jewish boy. And the parable says he “came to himself” while out with the pigs. Or it could be translated “he came to his right mind” like what it says about the man in our story today after he is healed by Jesus.

I don't know. It's just supposition. Just imaginative musings. But maybe Jesus sent him home because there was a waiting father for the man. Perhaps there was an older brother to reconcile with.

Perhaps you need to go home today because there is someone waiting for you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.