

## One

Luke 8:26-39

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Today we look at one of the most dramatic healings/exorcisms in the gospels: the healing of the Geresene demoniac. The Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor wrote stories with out-sized, sometimes grotesque characters. She did so that we might pay attention! So with this story.

Jesus' power as an exorcist may be the most foreign dimension of his ministry. What has this to do with me? I remember the counsel of novelist L.P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there."

In Jesus' day if you were sick or disturbed in spirit it was often seen as the work of Satan and his legion of demons. The boundary of the self was seen as extremely permeable to spirits, good and evil.

Take how we think of "germs" today. We cannot see them, but we *believe* in them! So with the unclean spirits or demons of Jesus' day. They were invisibly inhabiting the world causing havoc to body, mind and spirit.

Jesus was a “healer”, and a part of his ministry of healing was exorcism.

## I

In today’s text Jesus had crossed over into Gentile territory, unclean Gentile territory. Once and over again Jesus showed that *there was nowhere the love of God could not go*.

There he met a man who was a terrifying sight: a man possessed of demons. He lived among the tombs. The townspeople had banished him there, in the realm of the dead. I think of where we banish people today so to protect ourselves from them. I think of the thousands of people with mental illness on the streets, homeless because our health care systems do not provide care for them. I think of mass-incarceration in the U.S. We comprise 5% of the world’s population but imprison 25% of the world’s incarcerated. Over 2 million men and women, predominantly people of color, are in our prisons today. (The film “13<sup>th</sup>” is a powerful study of this problem.)

The people in this man’s hometown had tried to restrain him with chains, but he broke out of them. Now he roamed the graveyard, howling, naked, alone, cutting himself with stones.

I remember the day the school teacher came into my office, rolled up her sleeves and showed me the tiny white scars all over his arms where she had cut

herself with a razor over the years. Dear child of God, she was cutting herself to counter some deeper pain.

I know others who have done the same thing to themselves in other ways, lacerations of the soul. Self-destructive habits, self-sabotage, professional suicide. We cannot practice self-care when we no longer care what happens to us.

Karl Menninger, the noted psychiatrist, wrote a book long ago named “Man Against Himself.” We fight our own healing. The only hatred we allow ourselves is *self-hatred*.

## II

One way to talk about demonic possession today is to talk about disturbances in the self. And self-psychology gives us ways to think about it.

I have talked about the duality of the *false self* and *true self*. The false self is the self formed by the world around us. The true self is the self at the center us created by God. Sometimes we act out of the fake self; other times out of our true self. For example sometimes anger overtakes us out of proportion to what has made us angry. That’s the false self. One way to look at the spiritual journey is to see our work as excavating through the layers of false self to the true self.

Here's another model. There is the *ideal self*, the *disinherited self* and the *real self*.

The *ideal self* is our fantasy, perfect self. It is the grandiose self free from flaws. Then there is the *disinherited self*, the shadow self, the self we hate and try to hide. But sometimes we act out of our disinherited self. We become two selves, or a split self. The public self and the private self do not match.

We get a horrifying picture of this in Robert Louis Stevenson's psychological and spiritual thriller, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.<sup>1</sup> Jekyll was an upright gentleman raised in Victorian England with a strict sense of right and wrong. The problem was that he was tormented by evil impulses which he sometimes secretly indulged. He could not be happy as the good doctor because of the pull of the evil impulses. Neither could he be happy as an evil man because his conscience plagued him with guilt.

So, as the plot went along, he tried a chemical solution to his dilemma. By drinking a potion he could completely separate the two parts of himself. He could be good Dr. Jekyll without the pull of evil impulse and then be evil Mr. Hyde without guilt. Simple, huh? But not so simple. He began to lose control over which he would be, and Mr. Hyde began to take control more and more.

So there's the *ideal self* and the *disinherited self*, but there is also the *real self*, the totality of who you are, your highest ideals and your "loyal flaws", "warts and all". God wants to integrate all parts of you and make you whole, to love all of you so that you can become whole and free. *There is no place where the love of God cannot go.* As the hymn goes: "Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?" Sometimes the healing of the self happens dramatically. Sometimes the healing of the self takes time. A psychiatrist friend of mine from many years ago was one of the few psychiatrists in the city who treated persons with "multiple personality disorder", because the healing process was very slow and required great patience and care.

In today's exorcism of the demoniac his healing is compressed into a moment of time, a healing that usually takes much longer.

Here's one more kind of self. Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray talks about the "dissolved self".<sup>2</sup> This is where you have spent your whole life serving others, being who others want and need you to be, but you have lost touch with your real self, and need to build a sturdy container for your self.

Here is the hope of healing in Christ. Jesus helps you recover your true self. He helps you be "divided no more", to use the words of Parker Palmer. There is,

to use the words of Thomas Merton, “a hidden wholeness” within us all. Jesus leads us there.

### III

Now back to the story. Here is Jesus in unclean Gentile territory walking by a graveyard, uncleanness squared. But again, *there is nowhere the love of God cannot go.*

The man possessed by demons approached Jesus and cried out with a voice close to a scream: “What have you to do with me, Son of the Most High God? I beg you not to punish me!”

He had been taught a terrible lie, and now he believed it: That God was a punishing God, and that he deserved punishment. If God came near, he would be punished. But Jesus came not to punish, but to heal. As John 3:17 says, “For God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved (healed, made whole—it’s all the same word)”.

So Jesus commanded the unclean spirits to come out of the man. He asked the man “What is your name?” the man replied, “My name is Legion.” A legion was the principal unit of the Roman army, numbering 2-4,000 soldiers. So one translation says, “My name is ‘Mob’”. Have you ever felt that there was a “mob” inside you vying for control?

C.S. Lewis' road to conversion from a "happy pagan", as he called himself, to a follower of Jesus included a moment along the way when the Holy Spirit revealed to him the condition of his current self. Here are his words:

For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was Legion.<sup>3</sup>

#### IV

There's more to the story we don't have much time to develop. There's the comic relief of the legion of unclean spirits *begging* Jesus to send them into the nearby herd of pigs.

Pigs, in the ancient Jewish mind, were considered supremely unclean--- therefore a perfect resort hotel for unclean spirits. Viva Las Vegas! Send us there! They sang: "My kind of place, Las Vegas is!"

So Jesus did, and the unclean spirits flew into the large herd of pigs who promptly ran off a cliff into the sea and drowned. It's where we got the expression, "deviled ham".

The herdsmen went and told the villagers what had happened, and they came to see. And this is what they saw: the man seated at the feet of Jesus

“clothed and in his right mind”. It’s an altogether beautiful picture. Jesus, the man. His name was no longer “Legion” but “One”. So we sing with today’s hymn this prayer:

Reclothe us in our rightful mind;

in purer lives thy service find.

In deeper reverence, praise...

Of course, sadly, the townspeople were not happy about their economic loss. A whole herd of pigs. That’s a lot of bacon. And they asked Jesus to leave.

Jesus upsets the equilibrium of every economic arrangement based on the exploitation of people. Remember Luke’s story in the Book of Acts when Paul cast out the evil spirit of the young slave girl whose fortune telling powers made money for her owners? The owners had Paul thrown into prison. Think of the economic exploitation of black persons as slaves in our land, America’s original sin, or corporate exploitation of third world workers, or the sex trafficking of young girls. “Jesus, stop meddling in our economic arrangements and stick to preaching the gospel! If not, you can leave!”

Conclusion

Now to the conclusion, and back to the man. An artist friend of mine Adrian Martinez painted the scene of Jesus and the demoniac in *mid-healing*. With one hand the man is reaching for the cloak of Jesus to hide his nakedness and shame. With the other hand he is reaching for the face of Christ. He sees what he could never have imagined before: the Blessing of God in the face of Jesus.

He is us. Will we move back into shame and un-health, or move forward into blessing and healing?

Christ the healer comes to make us one. No longer a divided self, but one. He is the “center that holds”. He is, to use the words of the woman mystic, “My great dignity”.

There is something healing to me about reciting the great Hebrew affirmation of faith, the *Shema*:

Shema, y’Israel

Hear O Israel

Adonai Eloheinu

The Lord is our God

Adonai Echad

The Lord is One.

If God is one, then maybe, I can be, and you can be, and world can be. One!

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1. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (N.Y.: Arco Publishing Company, 1964).
2. See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minnneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 120-121
3. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (N.Y.:Harcourt, Brace,1955), p.226