Demons, Pigs and Jesus

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 8:26-39

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I reference the writings of C.S. Lewis often in my sermons. He has exerted considerable influence on me over the years. He’s not always an easy read. His distinctive British style can be rather dense and philosophi-cal at times. His most accessible writing is a whimsical yet serious treat-ment of evil called *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis writes in the forward of his book, “There are two equal and opposite errors about which we can fall into about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to find an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.” While some of us may have an excessive and unhealthy interest in devils, I suspect that most of us disbelieve and dismiss them altogether.

Therefore, this story about demons will seem strange to most of us. We don’t have any point of reference to demons in our day. Some commentators are quick to conclude that demonic possession is the way ancient people used to speak about mental illness. I wouldn’t be so sure. Mental illness is most assuredly a big part of the story and I’ll address it later in this sermon, but neither do I want to sweep the devil and his minions under the proverbial rug.

Evil is real and personal. We have seen it in our day. Some people seem altogether possessed with it. Paul writes that “we do not wrestle merely against flesh and blood…but against spiritual forces of darkness and evil” (Ephesians 6:12).

In our story, Jesus and his disciples set sail for the Gentile region of the Gerasenes. It’s Jesus’ first foray into Gentile territory. When Jesus steps ashore, he is met by a crazy man full of demons. We aren’t told that Jesus has any other agenda in this region than paying a visit to this lone mad-man. Time and again in the gospels Jesus gives attention to outcast people.

This wild man falls to the ground and cries out, “What do you want with me, Jesus, son of the most high God? I beg you not to torture me” (8:28). Jesus takes command of the situation by asking him, “What is your name?” A voice from within the man answers, “Our name is Legion for we are many.” A legion is a Roman detachment of 5000-6000 soldiers. That’s a lot of demons!
The demons beg Jesus not to send them into the abyss, the place of the dead. They bargain instead to be sent into a herd of swine grazing on a nearby hillside. They must be Gentile pig owners since Jews wouldn’t be caught dead breeding pigs. Instead, they raised sheep. Hogs were considered unclean in the Torah and eating pork was a violation of kosher laws. Jesus permits these demons to take possession of these pigs which, in turn, rush headlong over a cliff and drown in the sea.

The fate which awaits these demons and pigs would have suited Jewish Christians just fine. What’s not to like about this story? This crazy man is healed, the unclean animals are destroyed and the demons get what’s coming to them. Yet, for us 21st century readers this wanton destruction of other people’s property troubles us. There’s nothing in this story to suggest that Jesus’ intent is to destroy pigs. Rather, it demonstrates the malevolent intent of these demons in driving a herd of 2000 swine to total destruction.

The townspeople find this former madman “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind” (8:35). The contrast couldn’t be more striking. Where before the man was naked and out of his mind, now he’s clothed and in his right mind. Where before he couldn’t be restrained and was living among tombs, now he’s sitting at Jesus’ feet and willing to be taught. Yet, Luke tells us, “When they found the man sitting at Jesus’ feet, clothed and in his right mind, they were overcome with fear” (8:35, 37).

Why are they afraid? For starters, they have never seen such power before. Jesus has the power to do what no one else can accomplish. But there may be a second reason they are afraid. If Jesus keeps this up, he’ll be bad for the economy, at least as far as these pig farmers are concerned. They would rather have their pigs back, even if it means they have the crazy man along with them, so they beg Jesus to leave.

Jesus complies with their request. As he steps into the boat and is about to push away from shore, our healed man asks to go with Jesus. Jesus tells him, “Go home and tell people how much God has done for you” (8:39).
I’d like to think more about this matter of demon possession and mental illness given that demons are something we dismiss and mental illness is not talked about much in the church today.

I have never witnessed or participated in an exorcism. I’ve never met anyone who has been positively identified with demons, like we have in this story. So why, if demonic possession is so removed from our everyday life, does Jesus encounter them so often? Here is my take on things. When God comes to earth in Jesus Christ, the devil and his legion of demons go on high alert. Jesus’ presence smokes out evil from its hiding places. The forces of good and evil both intensify with Jesus’ coming.

More often, the devil can afford to be subtle. One of the great ploys of the devil is to trick us into thinking that the devil isn’t real. We scoff at the modern caricature of the devil in pitchfork and tails. And since we cannot believe this caricature of evil, it must not exist.

Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians that the devil masquerades as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:4). Would we be attracted to evil if we recognized evil for how monstrous it really is? Of course not! Evil tempts us by its powerful allure.

Let’s return once more to Lewis’ book, *The Screwtape Letters*. The senior devil, Uncle Screwtape, teaches his young nephew, Wormwood, “The safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft under-foot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” Evil is subtle; wickedly so. Evil tempts us in degrees.

If we profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we need not worry ourselves with demon possession. Demons can only take possession of people who give them unhindered access. But never underestimate the power of evil. Someone once said, “Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay and cost you more than you want to pay.”

So much for demon possession; let’s consider this matter of mental illness. The man in our story exhibits the classic signs of mental illness.
He engages in self-destructive behavior, exhibits antisocial tendencies and has lost touch with reality.

In all my years of leading prayers in church, I cannot recall many instances of praying for someone suffering from mental illness. I don’t recall people asking for prayer very often for someone suffering with bipolar symptoms, mood disorders or dissociative personality disorders. There is such a stigma about mental illness in our day. There’s no shame about praying for someone with cancer or a heart condition. So why is there so much shame about praying for people when their brains don’t work properly?

Oh, sure, we might say so and so is going through a rough patch. We might remark that the person in question is having a hard time. But we are loath to say anything specific when it comes to mental illness.

Rick Warren, author of the bestselling book, The Purpose-Driven Life, and pastor of a megachurch in Southern California, has become a vocal proponent of caring for people suffering with mental illness. Rick’s 27-year-old son, Matthew, took his own life last year after suffering for 20 years of clinical depression and borderline personality disorder. Rick and his wife, Kaye, have launched a mental health ministry in their church.

The National Institutes of Health reports that one in four adults experiences mental illness each year and one in 17 adults faces chronic mental health issues like schizophrenia, acute depression or bipolar disorder. That’s a staggering number! To set the record straight, my grandmother suffered from schizophrenia for much of her adult life.

Why is there so much shame when our brains don’t work properly? After all, we are all broken, each in our own way. Rick Warren says, “We’re all a little bit mentally ill.” I get his point. We all engage in a little crazy-making at times. Even among us normal types, our brains sometimes don’t work properly.

This story of the so-called Gerasene demoniac is placed between two other dramatic stories of Jesus’ mighty power. Earlier in Luke 8, Jesus displays mastery over a storm at sea (8:22-26). Later, in this same
chapter, Jesus heals a desperately sick woman and raises a dead girl to life again (8:40-56). The gospel writers claim Jesus has the power to do what no one else can do. He can heal. He can cast out demons. He can raise people to new life and restore us to our right minds. We talk so much about Jesus in this church because he has the power to do what no one else can do.

God has the power to heal people. I believe it with all my heart. I also believe God can use the medical and therapeutic community to bring about His healing. For too long, the religious and science communities haven’t been on good speaking terms. Rick Warren said there are two types of people: those who need recovery and know it and those who need recovery and don’t know it. Seek every means of God’s healing available to you.