

Luke 8:26-39
June 23, 2013

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

During seminary one of the requirements is an 11 week program, normally taken between the first and second year, of what is called Clinical Pastoral Education. That's a long academic name for chaplaincy. Now, six years later as I look back on that experience and all the different people and circumstances encountered there are many things I learned. One of those is the frustration of the unknown. It ranks near the top of the list of most challenging situations. That is listening to a patient and his/her loved ones for which there has been no diagnosis given yet of that which ails him/her or their loved one. It didn't take long to hear the frustration in their voice, to see the fear of the unknown on their face, and one could almost watch the wheels of their brain spin out of control dreaming of the endless possibilities that could be causing the illness that was wreaking havoc on their bodies. Not only were they bound by the physical pains of their ailment but they were also bound by the fact the medical profession could not give a name to their condition.

The reality of that frustration hit home for Amanda and I just over a year ago. It took several weeks to actually confirm what her neurologist suspected. Finally, we could put a name to the condition. Having a name for the ailment was freeing in and of itself.

Being able to name an ailment is the first step to treating it. It is a step toward gaining some control over a traumatic situation. It is a step toward releasing that which holds one captive and a beginning to the restoration of one's individuality.ⁱ

In our gospel text this morning we encounter a man trapped by some sort of ailment. We don't know fully what it may have been and in the ancient world a whole gamut of mental and physical illnesses were attributed to being demonically possessed. It is a challenge for us to fully get our hands around stories of demon possession. It's a term we don't hear a lot in modern medicine. Yet, as Michael Rogness points out "all the 'demons' Jesus confronts have three things in common: they cause self-destructive behavior in the victim, the victim feels trapped in that condition, and they separate the victim from normal living in the family circle?"ⁱⁱ

Such is the case with this man. The "demons" that possessed him led him to literally be bound by chains and shackles by the community, perhaps for his safety but also for their own. However, the text tells us those same "demons" would cause the man to break forth for his chains and lead him into the wilderness or that is a place of desolation.

Clearly, the man had become trapped in his condition so much so that when Jesus asked the man his name he responds with "Legion." No longer does the man identify himself with his birth name but rather has been stripped of that name and only views himself by the many "demons" that haunt him as a "Legion" was a unit of 6000 Roman soldiers. This condition has ultimately led the man to a life in which he wore no clothes and was homeless living in the tombs or "caves" in the remote areas of the region. He had lost not only his individuality but he also had become less than human in Luke's eyes. His condition had completely cut him off from the community and stripped him of his identity.

We know what happens next. We have encountered this story in the gospels time and time again. The destructive forces that plagued this man recognize Jesus' authority and power and beg him to leave them alone. And in typical fashion Jesus casts out the demons and Luke

presents to us another miraculous revelation of God's power over the destructive forces of the world and the man is healed and sent on his way. End of story! No, because as is typical this story is about so much more than simply a healing.

It is about a restoration and a transformation. It is about a man gaining back his identity and his humanization as once he is healed no longer do we find him naked and alone in the wilderness but as the text tells us we find him "sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind." And not only that but with the final verse Jesus sends the man away with a calling or a commission to return to his home, and declare how much God has done for him. Jesus has restored the man to the community that had relegated him to being bound by chains and shackles or simply cast aside naked and alone. Jesus has done much more than "healed" the man of his physical and/or mental demons because ultimately the Greek word translated as "healed" can be translated as "saved", "delivered", or "made whole." And although the text doesn't ever fully reveal the man's rightful name, by sending him back to his home we can draw a conclusion the man no longer associates himself with the name "Legion" but with his birth name. Further, Jesus names him now as a disciple as he sits at his feet and is sent off to spread the good news.

Perhaps, we can't fully grasp the Biblical accounts of "demon possessed" healings but can't we all relate to those forces that lead us down paths of destruction, those powers that cause us to become trapped seemingly in our own chains and shackles ultimately keeping us from living the life God intended us to live. Don't we all at one time or another lose our identity and instead become ensnared in the names assigned to us by the world or the names we sometimes call ourselves? If being able to give a name to an ailment is the first step to

treatment and regaining control then it seems the first step in overcoming those names that often define us and hold us back from being all God created us to be is returning to worship and remembering that in our Baptisms God has called each of us by a new name and opened to us a new future. It is in the waters of Baptism that God speaks and through God's word we are forever named as a child of God.ⁱⁱⁱ Nothing that we do in life, no destructive force or "demon" can separate us from God's love.

Perhaps, that is why Martin Luther would return to the font often against the demonic powers that tempted him and would say, "I am baptized."^{iv} It is here, in God's action that he recalled God's claim on his life given in baptism. It is here he recalled who he is, a child of God marked with cross of Christ forever. Return to the font and hear the name God has called you in your baptism, "Child of God." (Invite people forward at this time to be marked with the cross of Christ and told, "You are a precious child of God." Those not baptized may come forth for a blessing that they are loved by God."

ⁱ Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes on the Lectionary (www.crossmarks.com)

ⁱⁱ Michael Rogness, www.workingpreacher.org

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose, www.workingpreacher.org

^{iv} Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes on the Lectionary (www.crossmarks.com)