

June 19, 2022

Tell Me Your Name: Demons & Pigs

Luke 8:26-39\*

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Come Holy Spirit....

Good Morning!

The crowds are big and growing each day: a servant healed, a son raised, stories told, religious authorities prodded. He is the sensation. In a place and time without cable or internet, he is the attraction. He is their own Netflix mini-series. Wherever he goes people come to see, to hear, and afterwards to compare notes and dissect the stories. Who is this Jesus? What does it all mean?

Jesus' group, because that sort of attention can be wearying, his group has hopped in the boats and crossed the several miles of the Sea of Galilee mostly to get a break. Once on the other side of the sea they are no longer in a place where Jews are the majority. The unspoken hope is they will find a day or so to be left alone.

They have made their way to the Gerasenes' land. There is some confusion does this story take place near Gerasa with is some 30 miles inland from the Sea of Galilee or is it Gadara—a smaller town much closer to the sea. Either way each town is a gentile dominated Jews don't live there so who is going to care about their arrival or presence.

However, Jesus no sooner sets foot on the Gerasene soil, than a man comes to him from the tombs. A tormented soul, possessed in some way, who says to Jesus, "What do you want?

Do not harass me!

Why do you torment me?"

Whoa—so much for the "me-time" for Jesus and the little beach get away for the disciples.

Who is this man who approaches them?

He is naked.

He exists in the tombs amidst the decaying, rotting bodies of the town's buried citizens.

He is a man, who is possessed. Possessed by demons, mental illness, what name we call it matters little.

He is a man existing between the double yellow lines of life—in between.

Is he human , is he a demon? Is he alive -- is he dead?  
 He is betwixt, between, in a profoundly liminal space,  
 that cannot go on forever, a balancing act that will soon deteriorate.

Because of the demons that reside in his mind when he is in town the citizens chain him up, shackle him down. This restraint among the living he cannot bear. So with the strength only seen in the desperate he breaks those bonds, leaves the living and goes to dead. There he is naked, beyond vulnerable making his way between the putrid decaying corpses and the scavenging insects, rodents and animals. Is this a life he is living?

Then Jesus appears. The man approaches, screaming at Jesus. "Leave me alone. Do not torment me." He has heard Jesus command the demons to leave or some such thing.

What does Jesus do? What does Jesus do? Please remember this please—What does Jesus do? He asks the man his name. 'What is your name?' We do not ask beasts their names or expect animals to offer us their names nor would we ever inquire of a demon how it would prefer to be addressed—we ask humans. We ask people, with whom we'd like to be in relationship. We say to them, "So tell me your name."

"Legion," the man says. "My name is 'Legion'" for many demons have entered him. Legion it is. Then the man, or the demons, your pick the story is some 2000 years old, so you can read into it what you will. Some entity, residing in the man's mind asks Jesus if rather than being cast into the abyss—"Can we please go into those pigs over yonder?" 'Why not?' says Jesus. Why not go into the pigs. Jesus is a Jew, it's not like he cares about the pigs. Thus we may have the first biblical record of pigs functioning as "scapegoats".

Here's the thing—most who know this story remember the part about the pigs. They remember that the pigs run down the hill, or in an older translation they rush headlong off the cliff ( and fail to fly) and land in the Sea of Galilee. The pigs perish. That is what most biblical students recall. I am sure that this will make a most riveting scene when *The Chosen* Ap gets around to filming this portion of Jesus' story.

The folks who were witnesses as the swine almost flew....ran back to town and told everyone what happened. How the pigs are now dead..

What I find most compelling is when the townspeople return to find the dead pigs floating in the sea, they also find Legion, a man who was chained, sitting next to Jesus. Clothed, cleaned and in his right mind. I want to focus upon and ponder a man, once exiled, now cared for, formerly neglected and now tended to, shattering chains before, now sitting peacefully with the strangers who recognize his humanity.

The townspeople are terrified. Is it because of the change in Legion's demeanor? His complete transformation? Is it because the pigs became possessed and are now dead? Is it because the pigs were a major component of the town's economy? The major consumer of said pigs is the Roman army garrisoned in the region. And now with the supply of swine gone the town has a whole new restless 'legion' for which they will have to contend. The army has lost its source of food and the townspeople are afraid, but that's not my focus.

'What's your name?' Jesus asks him his name. Isn't that always the way? Every encounter of substance, every prayer of power, always invokes God's Holy Name and the name of the person for whom and with whom we are praying. "Tell me your name..." the beginning of every connection that matters begins with names.

"Tell me your name?" Here we see, in the midst of the demons, and possessed pigs, the power of our names your name, my name, sharing who we are, is the beginning of all relationships.

On this bright summer morning may we remember and take heart, that no matter where we find ourselves, in a world which is more fraught this week than last, in a world where a major war in Europe continues and the stock market is beset by bears, may we who find ourselves overwhelmed and scared, may we who want nothing more than to retreat into the tombs, let us remember that even though we may hide, Jesus one way or another will wind up on our shore, and ignore our fears, blast past our demons and doubt and stand with Grace and ask us who we are.

Jesus comes to all of us with only one question: What is your name? The question that begins all relationships. Our relationship, our connection to him, matters now more than ever.

On the shores of galilee, the streets of Michigan, Jesus says, "So, tell me your name?" And it all begins again....

Amen.

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