

Pentecost 4 Proper 7C

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Happy Fathers Day. I don't know if coming to church and hearing about demons and exorcisms and pigs jumping off a cliff is anyone's idea of a great Father's Day celebration, but here we are. One of the things I learned from my dad is when you're faced with a difficult or weird text to preach, the best thing you can do is dig right in, so here we go.

One of the top ten questions I get asked by people who don't know very much about the Episcopal Church, or maybe much about Christianity at all, is "do you know how to do an exorcism? Like, do they teach you how to do that?" And the answer, of course, is "no, there's no Exorcism 101 in Seminary, at least not the Seminary I went to" but – and this is your Episcopal Trivia fact for the day – we do have a rubric. We have a rubric for everything, and, like just about every other Episcopal rubric, it's designed, it seems to me, to make sure that even our exorcisms are done decently and in good order. It's page 174 in the Book of Occasional Services...

"Concerning Exorcism: The practice of expelling evil spirits by means of prayer and set formulas derives its authority from the Lord himself who identified these acts as signs of his Messiahship. Very early in the life of the Church the development and exercise of such rites were reserved to the bishop, at whose discretion they might be delegated to selected presbyters and others deemed competent. In accordance with this established tradition, those who find themselves in need of such a ministry should make the fact known to the bishop, through their parish priest, in order that the bishop may determine whether exorcism is needed, who is to perform the rite, and what prayers or other formularies are needed."

So there you have it. We're a church that isn't even sure we believe in demons, but by God, we've got a rubric in place for dealing with them.

I doubt very much that many bishops get called upon to enact this rubric, and on the whole I think that's probably a good thing, that we don't typically, in the Anglican tradition, waste a lot of time worrying about demons and demon

possession. One fairly common contemporary way – a usually helpful way, I think – of understanding the dynamic of demonic possession that we come across in the Gospels is as a primitive language for what we would recognize as psychological disorders. According to some people, the language of demons and exorcism is a different way – a different language – for the phenomena we would maybe describe as schizophrenia, or the disorder that is usually confused with schizophrenia, dissociative identity disorder, or something like that. Certainly there is a similarity in the symptoms – hallucinations, disorganized speech, culturally inappropriate or even catatonic behavior...the phenomena may be the same across the centuries, but the cultural-linguistic understanding of those phenomena – and, therefore, the “cure” for them – are very different. At staff meeting this week we were talking about schizophrenia, and someone said “do you know that some psychologists refer to schizophrenia as “the living death,” – I mean, you think about it. The living death. It has a kind of resonance with the behavior of this demoniac in the Gospels who lives naked, like a corpse, out among the tombs. His is a living death.

So that’s one way to understand what’s going on in our Gospel reading today. But this story of Jesus and the Gerasene Demoniac – and the village that is so threatened by the exorcism that Jesus performs – this story is so weird, so threatening, so compelling, that I think it’s worth digging deeper than a surface-level psychological interpretation will afford us. I don’t think we’re just talking about a guy with dissociative identity disorder. There’s more going on here.

This is a story about a community and a victim who are engaged in an almost ritualistic dynamic of violence – catch and release. There’s this guy in town who is possessed by demons. The demons seize the man and he becomes violent. And the community, in their kind of misdirected compassion, enacts a different kind of violence on him in return: they keep him chained up. For his own safety, presumeably. Until he breaks free – another act of violence that trumps the violence of the chains, and the cycle continues, this kind of ritual catch-and-release game that they play with the possessed guy.

Until Jesus shows up – and his is an exorcism is decidedly undramatic. He asks the demons their name – and they answer “Legion, for we are many.” There’s a whole village, a whole community of demons living inside this guy. And they are terrified of one thing: that Jesus will send them away. That he’ll

send him into the abyss. They beg Jesus to let them enter into the pigs, right, that's their last-ditch attempt at survival. Because that's the way that the demonic system works: you're a demon, you get exorcised out of person A, and you have to get inside person B – or, in this case, Pig B. And so the community never gets rid of the demons, they just shuffle them around, the demons find a new host, and the game continues with new players, new victims and new caretakers, new chains. The dynamic of violence can never really end. That's the way exorcisms usually work.

But the pigs that are taken over by the demons behave in exactly the same way that any large crowd behaves, when overtaken by what seems to be an outside demonic force: one of the pigs starts twitching, and all the other pigs start twitching until they're all running off down the hill, off the cliff, and into the sea. They're like lemmings; they just follow each other over. It's a really interesting switch in the way things usually work. This story doesn't end the way it's "supposed" to end, because it's the mob that gets thrown off a cliff, not the victim. The ritual logic – the logic that says "it is better that one man die for the people," that ancient dynamic of ritual uncleanness that demands a single sacrifice on behalf of the community to make the community clean again – that's the applecart that gets upset in this story. And that's the critical difference. In this story, it's the pigs, it's the mob that the demons enter that get thrown off the cliff, and suddenly the community of Gerasa is left with this man they've always known but have never really known, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind. He has come back from the dead. And they are afraid. They are terrified. Because the game is up. The world as they knew it has been suddenly ended, and they don't know who they are anymore.

As long as there are demoniacs to keep in chains, as long as there are psychotics to medicate, as long as there are sexual deviants to castigate, as long as there is an other, as long as there is someone who Is Not Us, who we can chain up and put in the middle of our community, we can take care of them until they break free – but as long as that dynamic of catch and release is preserved, our world is secure. And the cycles of violence can continue, because we know who we are, and we are not that. So we keep playing these violent games with each other, so that we'll remember who we think we are.

And Jesus changes all of that. He watches the demons throw themselves off the cliff and then turns around and faces that community of the Gerasenes, and they do not know who they are. The guy they thought was possessed –

their scapegoat, the one who allowed them to be the healthy ones – he’s sitting among them now, and he’s in his right mind. He’s not a victim anymore, he’s not even someone who needs care, he’s one of them. It should be a day for rejoicing – but it’s not. They’re terrified. Because they don’t know who they are now. They don’t know what this new world means for them.

This is a story about what happens when our demons get named. You start naming demons and you rob them of their power, and their only alternative is to throw themselves off the cliff, into the abyss. When we start naming what it is we’re afraid of, what we’re chaining up, what we’re being very careful caretakers of – when we start putting a name on that, then the victims of those demons realize that they don’t have to be victims anymore, because the demons have been named; they’ve lost their power to frighten us. And the victims can come out from the tombs; they don’t have to play these parts anymore, they can be a part of the community. And that terrifies the community. Because the victim isn’t the victim anymore. It’s like those dreams where you’re onstage and you don’t know what play you’re in, everybody’s following a different script than the one you memorized. That’s what’s going on here. The play got changed. The script was thrown out. The dead have come back to life. Everything we thought we knew has been turned upside down.

So I don’t think this is a story about a guy with a mental disorder. I think it’s a story about what happens when a society, a community, a family, a town, a church, a nation – what happens when the everyday operation of that world gets exploded by an outsider who walks in and whispers to the victims and the scapegoats and the undesirables who are lurking on the margins – “hey, it doesn’t have to be like this. You don’t have to be a victim.” And then gives those people the tools they need to become part of the community, to come back to life. What that means is not simply that somebody who was messed up has been healed – it’s bigger than that. A community that needed its disfunctionals, a system that relied on a twisted game of violence and repression has been exposed for the lie that it’s based on. Healing – exorcism, if you want – naming the demons and then driving them out – exorcism upsets the power dynamic, because it means that there aren’t victims anymore. The whole dynamic of who has power and who doesn’t – the haves the the have nots, the victims and the oppressors, the masters and the slaves – the way the world works, the way things inevitably end up when people start living together in communities, politics, the way of the polis, the way we

unconsciously order our households – all of that gets thrown wide open. St Paul says it this way: in Christ, there *is* no Jew and Greek, there's no slave and free – and then Paul even quotes the book of Genesis, and throws it back in the face of those who think that the world is inevitably and inexorably defined by God-given genital difference. Genesis says “Male and Female God created them,” and I think Paul is deliberately quoting Genesis when he makes the audacious claim that in Christ, there is no male and female. We think these ways of understanding the world are common sense – what could be more natural than to live your life based on the assumption that some people are guys and other people are girls and we're just different because that's the way God made us? And Paul says no. That's actually not the way it works. Which is just as shocking – terrifying – to us as a village without demons is for the community at Gerasa. Jesus walks into that town and whispers to the ones who have been chained up – hey, it doesn't have to be like this. He calls the demons out, he's taking names. And the demons don't just get reshuffled around, they don't get reincorporated back into the system, they get thrown into the abyss, which is exactly what they feared. They are annihilated. The system that defines some people as clean and some as unclean – some are crazy and some are sane – some are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are rich and some are poor, some are gay and some are straight, some are guys and some are girls – and that whole system gets thrown off a cliff, literally. It's gone. As soon as you start naming it, it starts to fall apart.

There is a legion of demons out there. And I want to be very careful about this; I think this is a language we need to be careful with, I think, because a lot of violence has been done in the name of casting out demons. But this story has power, because it's about resurrection. We can be different. It doesn't have to be this way. It doesn't have to be *this* way. There are things about us – deep, shameful, dark things, things we don't want to talk about – there are things about us that we can name. And as soon as we name them? We rob them of the power they have over us. I don't know what that looks like for you. I know what it looks like for me. But there is great power in naming demons. Healing happens when they're called out. And not just healing for you and me – healing for entire communities. It's terrifying – it's terrifying to think that there might be a whole different way of living.

What if our mission team goes down to Honduras and we really don't expect to be the rich white people who show up to do good deeds? Who are we then? What if we start by naming those demon? We're powerful white people who

live in the wealthiest nation in history, you're Hondurans who live in the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. We spend, on average, something like \$60 bucks a day. Most Hondurans live on less than \$2 a day. Somewhere in that system, in that game that we play as nations and as individuals, somewhere in there: there are demons. We think we're going to build latrines, but I don't think that's really why we're going. I think we're maybe going down there to start naming demons. I think part of going down there is a chance for us to name what's going on, to call it out. That's how we figure out who we really are. When we start naming demons, we realize that it doesn't have to be this way. It doesn't have to be this way. That's really scary. I kind of like it this way – right? I do pretty well when it's this way. And when that formerly demon-possessed guy sits down at my table, clothed and in his right mind? I mean, it's one thing to sing pretty songs about how we'd like to teach the world to sing, you know, everybody's welcome at the table, red and yellow black and white they are precious in his sight, but isn't that just the chains that we use to keep some people restrained so that other people can make decisions? I don't know. What I know is that it's scary to start thinking through what it means when Jesus starts whispering, "it doesn't have to be this way." But that's why I'm going down. I want to see what that's like. I want to see, in this community, what that's like. And I would ask you to pray for us – that the God who created us and the Son who loves us desperately would give us the strength of the Spirit of Life to ask the hard questions, to name a few demons, to move beyond our fear of what a different world might mean. I think we can do that. I think, with God's strength, we can face our fears. And we can name our demons. Amen.