

“My Name is Legion”

Luke 8:26-39

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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Our text for this morning is one of the greatest accounts concerning Christ and healing and missions in the Gospels. The story opens with Jesus and his disciples sailing to “the other side” of the Sea of Galilee, an area opposite the region of Galilee. Now this is a significant piece of information for whenever the gospels tell us that Jesus went “to the other side,” it’s not simply telling us that he’s decided to take a rest from ministry for a short vacation. Rather, it concerns “crossing boundaries” and going to places and confronting persons in the course of his ministry that the Jews would NEVER consider visiting.

In many communities, the poorest section of town was often situated on the “other side of the tracks”- that portion of the community bisected by the railroad. Growing up, many of us were often cautioned against going near there as we were told it was a high crime area and a place where many “undesirables” lived. Take a city like Waterloo, Iowa, for instance- a city in which I was a minister for some years. Directly behind our church, there was a set of train tracks over which numerous Black families passed in their migration northward during the early and middle 20th century, many of whom were poor sharecroppers from the rural south. Headed for the steel mills and stockyards of Chicago, they were seeking to find jobs and, more importantly, HOPE there. However, quite a few got off the train in Waterloo and never got back on. In time, it was there--on the other side of those tracks--that the highest concentration of Afro-Americans in the entire state would take root. Without ever knowing anything about the people who lived there, new-comers to the city were forewarned to avoid that section of town, ESPECIALLY at night. Of course, much of that fear was unfounded, rooted in ignorance and stereotypical racial attitudes. During my years of ministry in that city, I served on the board of the Eastside Ministerial Alliance (or “the Black Pastors’ Association” as it was more commonly referred to by the “WHITE” ministers in town) and found my colleagues who pastored and lived there to be as fine a group of people as any I have ever known.

So when it says Jesus was crossing over to the other side, it was an indication he was going to visit those who lived “on the other side of the tracks,” so to speak. That was a central characteristic of his ministry, that he was ALWAYS crossing boundaries, ALWAYS going to those places and pursuing those persons NO ONE else would bother with whether it involved adulterers or prostitutes, tax collectors or Roman centurions, lepers or demoniacs such as this morning. He saw them ALL as children of God and thus deserving of compassion and care WHATEVER their situation and REGARDLESS where they lived. Hence, I would suspect that if Jesus was going to the “other side” in the year 2022, it wouldn’t be to visit the good Christian people of Deer Creek or Tarentum or Gibsonia. Rather, it would possibly be to encounter alcoholic fathers and welfare mothers or their drug-addicted sons and daughters in the local jails and prisons; it would be to those discriminated-against Muslim Americans or lesbian/gay/and transgendered individuals or even undocumented immigrants who are seeking

greater economic opportunity or perhaps political sanctuary in our country for THESE are the ones who currently reside in what the Bible refers to as “the other side” here in America. It was for such persons as THESE Jesus was always holding the door open wide while WE often become the ones desperately trying to keep it closed!

The land of the Gerasenes, sometimes mentioned as Gerasa or Gadara in some translations, is not JEWISH territory but the land of the GENTILES- a world dominated by pagan practices and immoral behavior, a world despised by not just by God’s covenant people but by their GOD as well, or so they BELIEVED. When Jesus and his disciples arrive on “the other side”--the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee—they’re met by a man possessed of demonic spirits. This poor creature roamed throughout the countryside naked, living among the tombs, which becomes Luke’s way of saying that the man was both psychologically and spiritually dead. Efforts had been made to restrain him but neither ropes nor chains proved sufficient to hold him. It was commonly believed BACK THEN that the mentally deranged, lunatics, epileptics, and the hysterical were possessed by evil spirits while MODERN PSYCHIATRY has ANOTHER name for it- schizophrenia. Thus, from our modern perspective, we might say Jesus is encountered by a man with a split personality, someone who was a constant danger to others as well as himself, and without access to the kind of drugs we have today, his condition had to have been rather severe.

Many years ago, I was involved in a sanitarium ministry in Santa Cruz, California- a place called Sporup- a facility for emotionally and psychologically disturbed persons. Each week, a group of us would hold a worship service there along with a number of the patients. There was one person in particular I clearly remember- a young man with blonde hair who possessed a wild, crazed look in his eyes. He would observe the service from afar without ever joining in with us. One week, he approached me afterwards and asked if I was interested in seeing some of his poetry. “Sure,” I said, and he handed me a folder filled with what was undoubtedly the product of a disturbed and tormented mind. All of them spoke of abject loneliness and fear and even torture. He said, “For a dollar, I’ll sell you the whole bunch.” I handed him a buck and he gave me the entire packet of poems. When we returned the following week, I noticed the young man wasn’t around. I asked one of the orderlies if he was coming down and he said, “Oh you won’t see HIM anymore. He took his own life a few days ago.” To me, that young man was a modern-day “demoniac”- a deeply afflicted soul who could not hear the invitation of acceptance and love which had been offered to him week after week.

Seeing the man, Jesus approached him and asked, “What is your name?” The first thing we note is that Jesus never thinks of him as a devil or a monster. Rather, with great patience and understanding, he looks upon him as a poor, pitiful, lost human being who is in need of finding himself once again. In Jesus’ eyes, he is first and foremost a PERSON- someone who STILL possesses all the possibilities of humanness within him. He was able to look beyond all the labels society stuck on this young man, beyond all the maladies and afflictions which left him emotionally and spiritually bound so as to see him as he actually WAS. To our Lord’s mind, such persons as these were never thieves or murderers, adulterers or mad men but HUMAN BEINGS FIRST- children of God in need of the same love and acceptance as everyone else. By asking him his name, Jesus is appealing to his humanity and reminding him that what he once

was, he can yet become AGAIN for with Christ, there is ALWAYS hope!

The man's reply to Jesus' question is, "My name is Legion for we are many." Legion was the Latin name for an army regiment of about six thousand men and it referred to the multitude of spirits within him that continually tore his soul apart. Recognizing the superior authority of Jesus, the demons begin pleading with him that rather than being destroyed, that he might allow them to find ANOTHER host to inhabit. On the steep hillside, there was a herd of swine feeding- two thousand of them. He permits them to possess the pigs which in turn rush down the steep bank and into the Lake where they all drown. At the same time, the wild look of the once possessed man begins to fade from his face to be replaced with a look of reason and humanity and above all, THE IMAGE OF GOD. With his deliverance accomplished, he now falls down at the feet of Jesus to express his utter gratitude.

But that's not the end of the story. We're next told that the townspeople came out to see what had happened only to discover that the demoniac--he whom they had driven from their community years earlier--was now in his natural mind, sitting at Christ's feet. They then became frightened. But what were they frightened about? It's been suggested that because their pigs were now dead, he represented a supreme threat to their whole standard of living. Their economy was now in jeopardy and if Jesus was permitted to remain in the region any longer, no telling how many MORE of their livestock might be lost. If that's the case, then they were obviously more concerned about their FINANCIAL health than the wholeness and deliverance JESUS was able to afford them.

As Jesus got into the boat to leave, the man whom he had delivered plead with him to allow him to go with him. His love and gratitude to Jesus was such that he was willing to follow him WHEREVER he would go. But our Lord says no, that he should instead return to his house and describe what great things God had done for him. This thus becomes Luke's version of the Great Commission, informing the man he could be a much more useful disciple telling about the love and the power of Christ in his OWN HOME and among his OWN PEOPLE than he could traveling about with Jesus.

There are several important lessons we can take away from this story. FIRST of all, society has a way of placing labels on people who are different- persons who perhaps may think differently or act differently or look differently than the majority. We evaluate, categorize, and then rate people on the basis of their jobs, their sex, their color, their ethnic heritage, their religion, and their sexual orientation, among others. We determine whether they're acceptable or not--whether they're "our kind of people"--and if NOT, then we ignore them ALTOGETHER and treat them as though they're invisible or have some kind of disease.

Often in my travels, I'll visit different churches on Sunday mornings- it doesn't even have to be Presbyterian. Almost immediately, members from the congregation notice that there's someone new, someone unfamiliar in their midst and so after the service, they'll rush right over and put on their best smile and shake my hand vigorously to welcome me to their "club," I mean church. But then they'll try to size me up. Well I can sense this and automatically I know what they're thinking. They don't want to know if I love Jesus- no, they want to know if I'm a "liberal" or a "conservative," a "Republican" or a "Democrat," one of

them “abortion lover, tree-hugger, Black Lives Matter” types or one that drives around in a pickup with a gun rack on the cab’s back window and the rear covered with pro-NRA and anti-gay bumper stickers. Yes, I know this is a characterization, but I think you get the point!

You see, I’ d been to too many churches over the years and listened to people repeatedly tell me how much they want to grow, how they want to see more people in their pews and more money in their church coffers. But when I enquire further, I discover that what they REALLY mean is that they want to grow all right, but only with persons who are “just like themselves”- people who think and act and share the same values and social status as THEMSELVES, all the while posing as fine, Bible-loving, tea-drinking Christians while having very little interest in reaching out to the stranger in their midst, to those who live “on the other side” as JESUS did.

Often, it’s not just SOCIETY who attaches those labels and imposes those chains we are forced to wear but those persons who are CLOSEST to us. In one of my churches, I had an older member who was one of the finest Christians I have ever known. However, after some innocent mistake, she would frequently say to herself, “Oh Millie, you’re just so stupid- you’re an idiotic old woman who can’t do anything right.” And she didn’t just say this once but would make the remark again and again. One day, I stopped her in the middle of her self-reproach and said, “Millie, why do you continue to say such terrible things about yourself. It’s simply not true! You’re one of the most beautiful Christian woman I’ve ever met.” She said, “David, I can’t get out of the habit. I was married for years to a man who demeaned me constantly, who never once told me he loved me but instead repeated how fat and stupid I was, that I couldn’t do anything right and would never have anything if it weren’t for him. I knew that wasn’t true and yet, if you’re told it long enough, you can’t HELP believing it.” I said to her “Millie, from now on, I want you EVERY DAY to look in the mirror and say to yourself, “I’m a beautiful child of God and I am loved by my pastor, by my church family, and most of all by JESUS HIMSELF who loves me for who I am.” The fact is that Jesus comes to us and removes all those names and labels and classifications and gives us just ONE- that we are ALL beloved children of God whom God could never love any LESS than he loves his only-begotten son. That is ONE title that takes precedent over every OTHER tag that society or individuals can place on us and as Christians, as children of God, we must NEVER forget that!

My friends, I have no doubt that many people find themselves bound THIS VERY MORNING. In fact, some of US may be bound and not even KNOW it. We may be bound by spirits of anxiety or fear or unforgiveness or anger; we may be bound by habits and patterns that fill us with shame and rob us of God’s peace; we may be chained by years of bitterness or disappointment or perhaps memories of the past. But just as individuals can be possessed by assorted spirits, so can SYSTEMS and INSTITUTIONS and CULTURES fall under their influences AS WELL. There are many legions of demons to be driven from our modern civilization and they go by the name of ignorance and war and racial discrimination and homophobia; sensualism, materialism and economic injustice; alcoholism, drug addiction, and the list can go on and on. ALL these things can distort our perceptions of reality, especially of OURSELVES, and the only way we can find help is to first take an honest look at ourselves and then become open to the presence of Jesus who has personally come to deliver us from them.

Bear in mind that in this story, Jesus takes his disciples to the other side of Galilee, not to convert the entire community, mind you, but to save JUST ONE AFFLICTED PERSON- a young man whom the rest of the community he'd known and grown up with was now shunned by and were wishing that he'd just die or go away. And I'm convinced he did this because he UNDERSTOOD and could FEEL this lone man's alienation, not unlike the hostility and rejection and loneliness HE HIMSELF was experiencing- whether from the entire political and religious establishment or from his own church family at the synagogue he grew up in who at one point tried to KILL him because he had become "different" and they didn't recognize him any longer! Jesus only wanted for this person the same desire he had for EVERYONE ELSE- to experience health and wholeness and community once again, and what this can mean for US is that if Jesus was willing to travel to such obscure and out-of-the-way places just to reach one individual and make them "human" once again, then how much MORE will he endure to get to US and restore to US the help and health WE so desperately need!

And FINALLY, where the man wants to immediately enlist in Jesus' army and become one of his disciples alongside the other twelve, Jesus tells him he can be of MORE benefit by going home and declaring to his family, friends, and neighbors (who had long ago given up on him) that he had been healed and delivered, that Jesus had transformed him and he was now a NEW MAN, and if he could do that for HIM, then he could ALSO do that for THEM. Jesus thus makes him an apostle to his own hometown! Like that man, when we realize how much WE have been delivered FROM and by WHOM, we can then begin to live as free people are SUPPOSED to live- lives that are no longer governed by fear and despair but rather by faith and hope and love and joy; lives that are no longer defined or determined by society or even those closest to us but rather by Jesus Christ himself. He tells us the ONLY identity we shall ever need, the only label we shall ever wear is the same the world over- that each of us is a child of God, that we are heirs and joint-heirs with Christ himself, and that we are no less brothers and sisters to one another REGARDLESS of age or sex or sexual orientation, regardless of race or ethnicity or economic and social status.

Furthermore, this understanding of who we are and of how much God loves us cannot help BUT fill us with a boundless passion and sense of gratitude, so MUCH so that we find ourselves INCAPABLE of keeping silent about it and hoarding it just for ourselves. Instead, it compels us to let others no LESS bound know that such hope and power is available to THEM AS WELL. Thus, if we ARE Christians--persons who PERSONALLY know and feel the love and power, the grace and forgiveness of God in our lives, then we TOO must obey our Lord's command and return to our homes and our neighborhoods, our classrooms and our jobs to let the people in our lives there KNOW and EXPERIENCE the SAME. The task of liberation does not belong solely to JESUS anymore or ordained clergypersons with seminary degrees but is now the responsibility of the ENTIRE CHURCH. EVERY ONE of us sitting in these pews this morning has, by virtue of his or her baptism, been ordained to such a call and commissioned to just such a service. And we are assured, as surely as that young man was, that as we describe the great and wondrous things God has done for US to make US free, every spirit of THEIRS-- every habit, every temptation, every sorrow, and every fear--will TOO be able to hear Christ say, "In the name of love, I say COME OUT!" Amen and amen.