

Pentecost 2C 19 June 2022
Luke 8:26-39
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

"Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion;' for many demons had entered him." Let's pray:

What is your name? It's a straight forward question, isn't it? Under normal circumstances, it requires little to no effort to answer. But under duress or during dark times in our lives, our identity can cop a caning. What I'm getting at is that everyone has a name, but many people, like the poor man in our gospel today, express their identity as an extension of what they do, or what has happened to them, rather than who they are. Jesus is more interested in our true identity - who and whose we really are.

The target of Jesus' love in today's gospel calls himself, "Legion", but that's not his true name. That's not who he is. It's what has become of him, what's happened to him. Legion describes the extent to which this poor man's life has been spiritually disrupted, dis-integrated, disassembled. The causes, sources, and manifestations of his disconnection are many and great, leaving the poor fella' to identify with what has become of his life, Legion, rather than declaring who he is and to whom he really belongs.

At an historical level, Legion refers to a Roman army unit of 3000-6000 soldiers. So, when this man says that he is Legion he is saying, "I've been overrun. I'm divided and separated; I'm fragmented and fractured; I'm disrupted; I'm overwhelmed. My life is broken into thousands of pieces."

Now, while it's easy to be fascinated by the demonic in today's gospel, it's not Luke's main concern. It is important to identify the inner turmoil we all suffer and be aware of the things that disconnect us from ourselves and make God seem far away; even cut-off. However, we must remember that this man is a poor, struggling soul created and loved by God, and that Luke's gospel encounter is about Jesus' power to save and the love he can bring to bear in anyone's life. It's also another opportunity for Jesus to point to the glory of his heavenly Father.

This poor man is unidentifiable, even to himself. He has no centre. He no longer understands who he is. He has been dispossessed of himself and his humanity. His life has been shattered into pieces. He is alien to himself and alienated from his life. All this leaves him vulnerable, naked, exposed, and unclothed. He no longer lives in a house in the city, but in the tombs; an outcast from his community. He is essentially, dead to himself.

Who doesn't know what that's like? One day we look in the mirror and we don't recognise ourselves. We don't know who we are. Other days we think, "I don't know what's come over me. I'm just not myself today." Our head is filled with conflicting thoughts and voices. We chase each thought like a will-o'-the-wisp but inevitably get nowhere or are led astray. We listen to each voice but know nothing. There're times in life when our compass goes haywire and we no longer know who we are or what our life is all about. We silently wonder if we're going crazy. It's a time and place of separation, loneliness, and isolation. We're exiled from ourselves and other people.

I'm sure there're times when your life has been shattered and left in thousands of pieces, and you just couldn't put yourself back together again. Our Humpty Dumpty days are littered with broken dreams and dashed hopes. Failing health. The death of a loved one. Relationship struggles. Anxiety over faith and belief. We know what it's like to lose our real self, our life, our name, our identity, and our true Master. We know what it's like to be Legion.

I don't know what in your life has shattered. I don't know the thousands of pieces of the puzzle you're trying to sort through. I don't know the Legion of your life. But I can tell you one thing with full confidence. Whatever it might be, it's the place to which Christ comes. Jesus comes to the Legion of our lives. He did for the man in today's gospel and he does for each one of us.

Jesus steps into the fray of this foreign place, the land of Legion. He comes to us with power, focus, compassion, and inner clarity. His presence is unity, wholeness, and integration. He is the image of who we are and to whom we belong. That's why we continue to seek and follow Jesus as our teacher, guide, and Saviour. He is and has the life we truly hope for.

Jesus enters the land of Legion unafraid of death or the tombs in which this man lives. He's not distracted by the man's craziness. He's not repulsed by the man's nakedness or appearance. Jesus isn't limited by the chains and shackles that bind this man's life. He's unchallenged on enemy territory. Legion holds no power over Jesus.

“When the man saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?’” That question holds many things in tension. There's recognition and nonrecognition, likeness and unlikeness, sameness and difference. The man knows Jesus is nothing like him and yet, the man knows that he is somehow like Jesus. Despite his disconnection, something within the man can still recognise Jesus; the Divine, the One who saves, the One who is whole, complete, and holy.

It's true that we can only ever recognise things that we already know, things that in some way, we know are already a part of us. Despite the presence of Legion, the true image within this man was never completely lost or destroyed. It may have been taken over, covered up, forgotten, denied, or ignored, but it was never absent. It was this true image, the image of God conferred on all people, a reflection of Jesus himself, that recognised Jesus. That's just as true for us too.

Jesus stands before us as the mirror, the image, the truth-teller of who we really are. He gives us back ourselves. He shows us, reminds us, and draws our attention to the original beauty of our creation. Jesus stands before us with a truth that challenges the fragmented and distorted places in our lives, showing us the ways in which we're not true to ourselves. He reflects back to us the times when our true identity is lost and shattered. He shows us how sin stains our lives and covers up our true identity. And at the same time, he reassures us that his love and power to save and restore our identity, is indeed, Almighty.

Jesus comes to the man seeing and knowing a truth that the man can't see for himself. How can he? He's been convinced that his name is Legion. Jesus knows otherwise. In the face of that truth the unclean spirit cannot remain. Legion can never be our final reality or ultimate identity. Our true identity will always be Jesus. Jesus is the truth that commanded Legion to leave. Jesus is the truth that puts life back together. Jesus is the truth that clothed this man, returned him to himself, and seated him at Jesus' feet.

Everyone can tell a story about what it's like to be Legion. But, for every story about Legion, there's a more powerful counter-story. It's the story of how our life was put back together, how we were given back ourselves, how we were seated at the feet of Jesus. This is the story Jesus wants told. We need to tell this story, our stories, authentically, because others desperately need to hear the truth of who and whose they really are, and celebrate the freedom inherent in their true, God given, image.

“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you” to the glory of our heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.