

Second Sunday of Pentecost June 23 2019

Luke 8:26-39

Why were they afraid? The people who came to see what had happened. Those from the city and the country. When they saw the man from whom the demons had gone healed: sitting at Jesus' feet under control, clothed, in his right mind. Why did this make them afraid? When they hear again the eyewitness accounts of how Jesus had healed the man, why were they seized by a great fear? Why weren't they celebrating and rejoicing that the man had been restored and could be a part of their community again? Rejoicing that this man had come into their midst who could bring healing of even the worst things. Why were they afraid?

After thinking about it and having some conversation with folks this week, I think there could be a number of reasons.

Apparently, demons have to go somewhere (the abyss, pigs, other people?). So, if this guy Jesus could move them out of people, could he not also move them in? Where did that evil spirit go once the pigs are dead? So, is the fear because they don't know Jesus? The character of this man who has power over even the demonic. And they fear what he might do. That he might use that power against them?

Another reason could be they are afraid because Jesus disrupts their social order. They had established themselves and their relationship with this man as the one possessed of demons. Now, they are afraid of the loss of what they knew. They ask the question. What will this healed man bring into their society? What will change just because he is now amongst them healed, different from before. They knew how to live with him possessed, but now they don't know how to live with him healed. And they are afraid of that change.

I could see this. Regardless of possession of demons, just bringing someone new into a group can change, some might say destroy, the dynamics already at play. I saw this happen with a colleague a number of year ago. He got a call to a congregation here in Iowa. A decent sized church in a mid-sized town with a college nearby. The church had long running tensions between those who were there because of the college and those who had their roots in that town. But they had a long-term pastor and associate and everyone had established their place long ago, enough to get along. To describe what happened next, I'll invite you to think about that congregation as a puzzle with four pieces. Two of the pieces are the different parts of the congregation (college and town). The other two are the two pastors. Remove one of those pieces for the retiring long-term senior pastor. Now, bring in a new piece...my friend. Now, my friend is a unique person to begin with,

but regardless he is going to be different from his predecessor, right? Just by being a different person. For our analogy, he's got a different shape to him than his predecessor. What happens when you try and put him into that puzzle...into the space left by the previous pastor? You're going to cross some boundaries...right? Can't help it!

Now in most healthy congregations, there is a bit of friction when someone new takes over, as people readjust the space they take up, make room for each other before settling into their new "shape". In this case, the underlying friction meant that there was no room or desire to move. And, instead of addressing the root of the conflict within the congregation between the two groups of members, the congregation attacked my colleague for what he "did". After what became an awful 9 months of attacks on him and his family, my friend left.

So, the Gereseanes fear of the challenges the man from whom the demons had gone would present them were well founded. His presence would cause them to re-think everything. To change... how they lived together.

Perhaps that is the biggest fear of all. Change. Perhaps there is even a bit of fear in the man possessed by demons. Perhaps it is at least partially his voice that cries out, "Do not torment me!" That in the face

of being healed by Jesus, of being free of this torment of the Legion, he got scared. What will it be like? How will I live? Will my friends and family take me back? Will I ever be seen as anything but “the man who formerly had demons”? Can I truly start over? Valid and scary questions all.

All he had known for some extended period of time was living this life. Possessed. Naked, uncontrolled, out of his mind. What was next if Jesus did this thing?

I talked a couple of weeks ago about the power of God in the Holy Spirit. How that power is dangerous. Because it is out of our control. Because it has the power to change things whether we want it to or not.

Jesus has that same power. That same wild, uncontrolled power of God to transform us. To heal us of those things that possess us. And if we stop to really think about that, it probably scares the daylights out of us at some level.

Some of us have things that are obviously in control of our lives. Addictions; to substances- alcohol, drugs: To things; pornography, gambling, our phones, computer games.

But each of us has those things we recognize are parts of ourselves that might not be what or how we want to be, but that the thought of giving up scares us. Because it is part of us. Part of our understanding of who we are. Because we know how to live with it and the thought of living some other way is scary.

Even when we are living in situations that are unhappy, that we see are things we cannot sustain, that are unhealthy, still we will stay there because it is what we know. Because fear of what will happen is greater than the fear of what is happening. I know this effect first-hand and how hard it is to make the move to change that situation. I have heard it time and again from people in abusive relationships and other unhealthy living situations.

In this way, I think we all can appreciate the fear of the Gereseanes. Jesus' coming has shifted the foundation of all they had held to be true, of what they knew, of how they had lived together. As one author put it, "We often prefer the devil we know to the freedom we do not." This is true of individuals (think addiction, abuse) and communities (think growth, think dealing with unhealthy relationships/power dynamics)

But we have an advantage over those Geresenes. Because part of their fear is rooted in the fact that they don't know who Jesus is exactly.

They live on the other side of the Sea of Galilee from his normal stomping ground. They are Gentiles, not Jews.

We, on the other hand, know who Jesus is. Son of God, come down to give us life...fuller and more abundant. Jesus, who desires only good things for us. Who has come to heal us. The one who we can trust, because Jesus has gone to the cross for love of us.

We know that Jesus appreciates how scared we are. That Jesus has seen and known the fear we experience. We know, that even with the awesome power he possesses. Jesus does everything he does in love. Care. For the good of us. That his love is agape- other centered.

Such knowledge does not necessarily make us less afraid, but I believe it helps to keep that fear in perspective. To give us the courage, the faith, to trust. That gives us the power through the Holy Spirit to let go of those things in our lives that possess us. So that we might sit, clothed and in our right minds at the feet of Jesus.

So come this day my fellow believers. Whether fearful or confident, dip your fingers into the waters and be reminded of your claiming by God. Taste the bread and wine that is the power filled reminder of how much Jesus loves us. And go into this world, healed, and proclaim all that God in Jesus Christ has done for you.