



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Giving Legion the Boot

by Rev. John Strommen on Luke 8:26-39

Sunday, June 23, 2019

Five years ago, Heidi and I went to Paris for our 30th wedding anniversary and one day we went to the famous Peres les Chaise cemetery, where anyone who is someone in Paris is buried - Frederic Chopin, Toulouse Le Trec, and Jean Paul Sartre. Oh yes, and Jim Morrison from the Doors.

Well, we entered the cemetery, in an expansive wooded area where all the graves are quite close together, and where it seemed that each gravestone was basically commissioned art. Fantastic sculptures.

We hadn't been in there long when I heard something, so I asked Heidi, "Do you hear that man swearing over there?"

"Sure do."

Now, it's true, neither of us speaks French, but you could tell he wasn't reciting poetry or singing church hymns. His voice was loud and angry, you just knew it was foul, and there was no plea to "pardon my French."

"Geeez, sounds like a nasty argument. Obviously, this guy's in an argument with someone. Hope they get their quarrel settled."

But then as we kept listening, we realized, "Wait a minute. There's no altercation here. He's the only voice." The intensity of the cursing continued, unabated. Eventually we realized there was someone who was just wandering in the cemetery loudly and angrily cursing. Curious about who this guy was, and not particularly wanting to run into him, we found a guy who worked at the cemetery.

"Hey, what's up with that guy who's swearing?"

"Oh, he is often here in the cemetery. We are quite used to him. He is harmless."

"Sounds like the guy in the Bible story, the one named Legion." I said. He didn't seem to recognize my reference. "Please don't tell me he's wandering around naked."

Well, we never did encounter the guy, but we sure could hear him.

The whole experience made me wonder, who is that guy, really, underneath the rants and the rage? What were the forces that were holding him captive, and what would it take to set him free?

We meet a similar fellow in the Gospel of Luke. Right after Jesus calmed the wind and the waves on the Sea of Galilee, they sailed over to a country called the Gerasenes – which is a Gentile country, not Jewish - and there they immediately encounter a naked man possessed by demons, who lived in the cemetery. He was powerful enough to break free from chains when they attempted to confine him. Well, it seems that man, or perhaps the demons, had already sensed and anticipated Jesus' arrival and were waiting for him.

Jesus immediately commanded the demons to leave the man, but they begged Jesus, "the son of the most high God," to leave them alone. "What do you want with us? Please leave us alone!" they said.

So, Jesus asked, "what is your name?"

"Legion," for many demons had entered the man. Apparently, the ones speaking are Legion, not the man who was possessed. He was being held prisoner by Legion. However, these demons seem to know they've now met their match. They beg Jesus not to send them into the abyss. You know, they'd rather mess up someone's life than just run free in the wilderness. So, Legion negotiates. "If you're going to drive us out of this man, send us into that herd of pigs on the hillside." Which Jesus did and thereby created the very first deviled ham ever recorded. But no one was going to eat this ham because the pigs rushed headlong into the sea and drowned. Now Legion had *no one* to inhabit. They were tricked by Jesus!

Well, the people in charge of the pigs run into town to tell everyone what happened and soon the whole town is abuzz, so they go to see this Jesus guy and find out what happened. There they see the local guy – we'll call him Larry – who had since become Legion, now sitting calmly and at peace at the foot of Jesus. He had been healed, set free from his spiritual oppression. Larry was back.

So, now what? Do they throw a party for Larry's return to health, for his return to their community? No, they're not in a celebrating mood, *because they're afraid*. So, the people of the Gerasenes ask Jesus to leave.

Think about this. If you were those people, wouldn't you be filled with hope if the naked guy who wandered the graveyard howling at the moon – yes, that guy! – suddenly was restored to his normal smiling self? And, furthermore, had to decency to put on some clothes? The people of Gerasenes have just witnessed a miracle! Why wouldn't they *want* someone like Jesus around? Instead, they're more like, "We can handle Larry being deranged, but we cannot handle Larry being back to normal again. Now that's scary!"

What do you think this fear is about? It sure seems like trust is a big factor: can they trust a Jew? Can they trust someone who is powerful enough to send demons

packing? One is mindful here of the old saying, “Better the devil we know than the devil we don’t.”

There also seems to me to be fear of change here. “If Jesus sticks around,” they may have wondered, “maybe he’ll drive out our demons, too! But then what will my life be like? What will our community be like then?”

For us, too, do we really want Jesus messing with our lives? What if we change?

And so, it is, that Legion shows up in our lives in so many ways that occupy us and diminish our spirits, and yet we often are complicit with our oppressor as our true self gets buried. On one level, Legion can be very personal: addictions, mental illness, guilt, shame, and despair. For many, Legion is a battle with despair over the many things that compete for our attention, energy and obligation. We feel trapped and tired because we are juggling too many things and we no longer feel in control. What we really need is just...*less*. What we really need is *peace*, our sense of self restored. We cry out for a savior to set us free from our oppressor, but we’re afraid of this change, too. So, God seeks - through Jesus - to restore trust within us order that we may have faith.

But to really unpack what this Legion story meant originally, a brief bit of background might be helpful here. This region of the Gerasenes is the setting of a horrifying historical event. According to Josephus, about a hundred years before Jesus taught and healed, toward the end of the Jewish revolt against the Romans, the Roman general Vespasian sent soldiers to retake the Gerasenes region. The Romans killed a thousand young men, imprisoned their families, burned the city, and then attacked villages throughout the region. Many of those buried in Gerasene tombs had been slaughtered by Roman troops. In fact, do you know what they called a Roman occupying army at that time – an army of approximately 6,000 troops? A legion. Those people knew the oppression of Legion every bit as much as Larry – just in a different way. One can see where trust would be an issue for these folks. Who can you trust? Are those with power trustworthy? They already saw a herd of pigs destroyed.

So, it would be impossible for listeners of this story in its original context to not hear it without heavy political overtones. Legion, for them, at the very least was an occupying power that terrorized their community. For us, too, Legion can mean political powers that be, social and economic systems of which we are a part, family systems - any powers that bury our personal identities and diminish our lives. For instance, for those who have grown up in a dysfunctional/abusive family of some kind, this is a form of Legion that binds people and it can get passed on to the next generations.

Heidi and I were at the Hugh Jackman one-man-show last night and they performed that moving song from “The Greatest Showman” called “This is me,” an

anthem about personal identity and the social forces that repress and bury some individual's identities because they don't fit. It's a song that celebrates freely and proudly claiming one's identity. I think Legion, in any form, locks us up and diminishes our lives. It is our savior, Jesus, who unbinds us to be "me."

What are examples of this? Well, we're celebrating Pride weekend, and the expression "coming out of the closet" is there for a reason: our culture has historically encouraged these folks to keep their identities locked up in a closet. That's Legion.

Or what about unskilled workers who are able and willing to work hard but unable to secure a livable wage? Are they being occupied by economic forces that use them to make a profit, but then discard their own earthly needs? If so, that is Legion.

How about asylum seekers who are being currently imprisoned at the border in camps, with children being separated indefinitely from their parents? These are mostly innocent people fleeing oppression who have merely encountered more oppression and been imprisoned without representation or recourse. This ought not be partisan: regardless of one's views of immigration policy – whether those people should get in or not - no Christian person should tolerate grotesque human rights violations. It's ironic that the ones referred to as "invaders" really had no power to begin with and have now themselves been invaded and occupied by us. This is "Legion" and we should not be silent about such things. History has not been kind to our internment of Japanese Americans and it will not be kind to what is happening now to these human beings.

God's promise through Jesus is that these occupations – societal and personal - these oppressions that diminish the human spirit, will be broken by God's Holy Spirit. We can trust a God whose love for us led him to become embodied, suffer and die, all for the purpose of setting us free from the powers that occupy us so that we might be who we were intended to be. For we who gather today as a part of God's work and movement in the world, we bear this message and are called to work for the freedom of all who are held captive, in whatever way.

So, we are called into faith and trust in a God who breaks chains so that people might have life. Let us be sensitive to all the ways that we might resist change – even restoration and healing – because we're afraid to trust, because we're afraid to let go of what we know. Amen.