

Sermon Text: Luke 8:26-39

Holy Father may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Think back just a few moments ago to that unusual Gospel reading, that story we all know of the man called Legion for he had many demons, or in some more contemporary translations, he's called Lots 'cause he lots of them. Such an unusual idea and unusual concept, but I think through my Wesley Commons Wisdom of the Ages group, I have an entirely different approach, which is also very legitimate and in keeping with the message, the foundational message of Scripture. I have a very different approach today than I've ever done in 25 years.

It's about community, community and belonging, and the outcasts that we create sometimes in an effort to create community. It's funny if you have the same hobbies, it doesn't matter what they are, the same hobbies or the same interests, and you can meet up with a group of people and instantly feel a deep sense of community. I remember I used to work at a campground in Myrtle Beach, and I don't know if this is still true, and some of you may have been some of those folks. The folks who owned Airstreams all had the numbers on the front of those stainless steel Rolls Royce of travel trailers, and they could look in their directory and see by the number who that was, and they'd call them by name, and they'd gather around, and they would associate only with other Airstream owners. I worked three years in a travel park in Myrtle Beach, and that's what I noticed. That's what I noticed. Forgive me if I offend you, but that's just what I noticed.

Belonging. Mutual identity. I went bike riding Saturday before last with some old friends, and we met in the Bi-Lo parking lot in Clinton because that's half way between where they live and where I live now, and some other folks showed up on their bikes at the same time, and we introduced each other, we joined together, we talked about this and that, and we rode for two and one-half hours and about 40 miles of beautiful countryside around Clinton. They were teachers. They were salesmen and advertising agents. One attorney. One preacher that was I, and an accountant, and we happily became close and friendly, just because we had bicycles and funny helmets in common. On a primal level, it was something like this. Look, I can ride a bike. Me, too, let's be friends.

In case you're wondering, and some of you have asked, if I've started wearing those skintight biking shorts, yes, I do, under my real shorts! I'm not going that far.

How little it takes to stimulate our built-in hunger to belong, our built-in desire to be incorporated into some sort of community and often any sort of community will do! I spent a great deal of my college time studying and even interviewing and going to the homes and lectures and meetings of different cults and sects and other kinds of offshoot groups. Now, they use this desire to belong to attract and to keep people in a sort of a closed community, but that desire is built in. On another level, advertising does the same thing. In advertising, they create an ever-changing cult of fashion, the artificial zeitgeist

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of the moment. They create desire for products and promise when you have this, now you have arrived! Or when you have this, you will be stronger, you will be better, you will be faster, you will be more attractive, you'll be more desirable, you will attract others, you'll make others envious. They will want to be around you. They will ask you to belong to their group. Buy our product! It does all of this! Buy this, and someone; somewhere will think you are worthy to be in community with.

Advertisers are really abusing our inborn desire to belong. God gave us that, and they turn it against us to sell us things that say they will make us more worthy in the eyes of others; at least, that's what they promise. Fraternities and sororities, and some of us were members of those, very often, not always, but very often will have dangerous and humiliating rituals that young folks will go gladly through to feed that hunger to belong, to be a member of a community. Some even consent to have symbols burnt into their flesh, branded to belong. Inner city gangs do the same sorts of things. Studies say that most of them have no intact families. Most of the young men in the gangs have no fathers, and so gangs become a way of belonging and also protection in their minds.

There is not denying the evidence that we all have a deep need to belong, and often we go so far in our need to belong that we begin to build a border around us to exclude a buffer of outcasts to show just how important our belonging is. What are you willing to do to feed your need to belong? Who are you willing to cast out and exclude to keep your community closed? What is the literal meaning of an exclusive community anyway? You see that occasionally on advertising – an exclusive community. What does that mean except that it excludes others so that our belonging becomes that much more valuable?

The story of Legion. We don't know his real name. When he got into his right mind, I suppose that it was known, but it's not told. The story of Legion, the man with many, many demons, is the story of community, of status quo, and of the fear of change. Whether it is good or bad, our lives gain momentum over time and acquire a sort of inertia in a particular direction, and even when we hate the way things are, it can be fearful to even think of radical change! If we change, then where will we belong? If we change jobs, will we have to move? Will we move, and that will redefine us because we have to move to a lesser neighborhood and then I'll belong to a lesser community, and I will be worth less.

Fear of change plants that sort of thinking into our heads. Legion, filled with demons, knew full well who Jesus was, and knew full well of Jesus' power to change, in fact, Jesus had the power to cast them out of their comfortable crashing in the body of this disturbed man. They begged, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God? I beg you do not torment me. Leave us alone!” They had their own disquieting stalemate in their wretched twisting of this man's life. At least, they had a place to be, a community of evil, and they wanted nothing to change! Evil, it seems, fears the good. Evil fears good's power to cast it out and to restore and make whole and healthy a human soul. Evil fears true communion and true community with God. Good threatens evil.

Belonging to God threatens evil because if we are in communion with God, we are no longer as susceptible to the false divisions and desires to cast others out of our presence in order to feel special about us. When we are in communion with God, we see the whole world differently. We no longer think in terms of just me and mine. We start to see that community that God intended was God at the top and then myself and then others in sort of a triangle that goes round and round and round. Through the smoke of war and lies and status symbols, we can barely see it.

The Scripture is plain. God intended community. Loving God. Loving others as we love ourselves.

John Wesley wrote about this, about the life connected with God, and how it changes us. He said that renewed after the image of God in righteousness and holiness, when the love of the world is changed into the love of God, pride is changed into humility, passion into meekness, hatred, envy, and malice into a sincere, tender, disinterested love for all mankind. Wesley wrote this so long ago. A sincere disinterested love for all mankind. This is the nature of the new birth, writes Wesley. So it is in everyone that is born of the spirit.

Notice the evil in this story wanted to stay evil and begged Jesus to go away. Evil also has inertia of its own, and does not want to change. Now to the community that changed the man called Legion out in the graveyard of all places. They put him among the dead. He was unclothed. He had no dignity. He wasn't considered fully human. He certainly was not fully alive. That is what we do when we exclude people. They are not one of us, and so they are not as valuable as us. They are not as worthy as us. It is a tendency of all nations, not just ours, of all races, not just one in particular, of all families even, a tendency to think this way. We are THE people, and others are others, outsiders, less than us, not one of us. Perhaps their lives and their children are not worth as much as ours. Perhaps it is okay to lie and cheat and steal and even kill them because they are not us! This is a human tendency that shows up in all nations, races, and history. It is an evil thing.

The people in Gergesa felt perfectly justified in chaining Legion out among the dead, naked and dehumanized. After all, he was evil, and we are not evil in the same way, and so we are better than him. We must be protected from him. We have done a good thing to cast him out. He is not like us. He will never be like us, in fact, we feel just a little bit superior knowing someone that much worse than us is out there among the dead, living like an animal while we, the good people of the world, behave ourselves in our homes.

Jesus ignored the cries of the demons to stay comfortable, stealing the man's life, and cast them into the pigs, and they self-destructively cast themselves over a cliff and into the water. Gone were his demons. He was healed and whole again. He was in his right mind.

You know, in a way, Christian faith is all about getting back into our right minds. The minds that God intended us to have, the belonging to God and with each other we were meant for, and forgiveness is the door, and God's Holy Spirit is the power that enables us to cast out the evil that separates us from our true selves and from each other. The selves we were meant to be. God's Spirit gives us that power to love and to forgive. What about that? What about that? What is it that you really need in order to get back into community with your outcast friends, your outcast family members?

At the wedding, we were told that certain people had to be away from each other. Can I get an Amen on that? Is it just in my now new extended family that happens? Okay! What do you need to be back in community with your outcast friends, outcast family members, and cast out groups that you've written off as less than me and mine? What is it that you really need to feel belonging with others who have been separated from you? Isn't it love and forgiveness? That is what God offers in Jesus Christ, and through His spirit offers through us to give to others so that we might be connected in more mighty ways. Ways not possible or even desired coming to faith in Christ. It's a funny thing about the status quo. The people who cast out the possessed man were also afraid of Jesus' power to change. They begged Him to leave their town just as the demons had begged Him to leave them alone! They begged Jesus to go away! They saw their very own outcast, our outcast, healed and made whole, and it scared them! It scared them! Why? I think it was something like this.

If Jesus can make such a great change in him, what might He do to me? What might He do to me? They wanted things to stay the same even if it meant the outcast staying the outcast among the dead, even if it meant them staying half dead and just barely better than their demoniac! It seems to me that they were afraid of Jesus' power to change, and so they cast Jesus out of town! They knew He could heal people. They knew He could change people. They knew He could reintegrate the deranged back into community, and they really did not want any of that. So fearful were they of change that they actually cast Jesus out of town. I never really noticed that before. Jesus left the healed man behind. He wanted to go with Jesus, but He said, no, you stay and you tell people. He left the healed man behind to remind them. Jesus told him to remind everyone in Gergesa of what God's power can do.

You know, healed and saved are the same root words in Greek. He was saved from his outcast condition. He was saved by God. He was healed and made whole, and the whole affair irked, I think it irked, the town that liked things just the way they were!

Every congregation, I think, every congregation needs someone who is not afraid, “I was possessed for a time by my own personal demons,” however you interpret that, but be they theft, be they lust, be they addiction, be they arrogance, be they judgmental spirit, gossip, lying, what you have, our own personal demons, every congregation needs some annoying person that Jesus leaves behind to tell us that God can change people, and to remind us, perhaps even make us fearful of the fact, that we need changing, too.

“Warm Hearts ... But Cold Feet”

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I've been in so many congregations where there was at least one vocal person that said I used to be like this, and God changed me, and I have noticed over the years that that annoys people. It annoyed the people of Gergesa so much they asked Jesus to leave after the spectacular healing.

We, when we are annoyed, are doing what the town of Gergesa did to Jesus. We're saying, "I don't want to change! I believe in your power to change, and if I ever need it, God, I'll call on you, but I don't want to change. I'm even afraid of change. I don't want to hear about it." But we all need changing, too. We are all in the same boat before God, all offered the same belonging through the love and the forgiveness and the power of Jesus Christ, and we all need nothing less than the love, the forgiveness, and the power of Jesus Christ to change us, to heal us, to save us, to make us whole. Amen.