

THE NEW COMMUNITY: COORDINATES FOR CREATION

LUKE 8:26-39

JUNE 24, 2007—ANNUAL MEETING, MAINE COMMISSIONING, BAPTISMS
THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Today's story of Jesus exorcising a man of demons can either be seen as a relic of biblical record or as relevant as anything the bible has to offer.

Don't let the word "exorcism" throw you. In ancient times the idea was that what are exorcised from humans are spirits and demons from *without*.

Indeed, in Jesus' day it was commonly accepted that such powers lived under, upon and above the earth. St. Paul writes to the Philippians that "God exalted Jesus and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that he is Lord."

In our time the spirits that possess us are thought to come from *within*. Kathleen Norris refers to a Benedictine monk who talks about the demonic as "an extension of the self."

When a new monk asks a wise abbot, "How to the demons fight against me?" the older, wiser man says, "They do not fight us as long as we are doing our own will."

"It is when we begin to resist and question ourselves, seeking another, better way of life that the struggles begin. Our own wills become the demons and it is these which attack us."

Whether from without or from within, Jesus is the one who brings healing, wholeness and peace. Such a peace as only comes from a heart and mind restored to their intended state free of conflict, confusion and fear.

It is interesting to note that Jesus ventures deep into Gentile territory to heal this man. The city of Gerasa from which the Gerasene gets his name is a Roman city with visible ruins to this day of city gate, triumphal arch, hippodrome, theaters, and pagan temples.

In other words, this is an away game for Jesus. He is in the arch rival's stadium. This is not the land of Abraham and Sarah, of kosher kitchens and synagogues. He is on foreign turf. It reminds me of the one and only time I visited Las Vegas—a foreign place unlike anywhere else I had been; dripping with allurements, temptations and high-stakes betting.

Yet, even here Jesus' power reigns supreme. The demons that possess the man come to heal, ask Jesus permission to enter a herd of pigs which he gives, only to see them rush headlong into the sea.

If they thought entering unclean animals and going into the deep would be their escape they were mistaken. The story immediately preceding today's account is of Jesus calming the storm when he and the disciples are in a small boat and a tempest threatens to capsize them.

The story is rich with symbolism, the sea itself the symbol of chaos—which takes us back to Genesis when God brings order out of the watery deep. Jesus' authority extends into the darkest corners of creation.

So whether powers from without or from within, Jesus' power to heal extends to both.

And this was an important word for Luke's readers to remember especially when Jesus sends his missionaries to the four corners of the earth to bring good news.

Between the lines Luke is saying to any sent out for Jesus, the spirits of any person or region are not able to withstand the power of those who teach and preach and heal in His name, the name above every name.

But today's story is not just about one man being healed it is also about and nicely contrasted with a community that chooses to remain ill.

You see rather than rejoicing in the healing of this man who had been such a menace to the community, that he was periodically placed in chains, the people of the city and surrounding region, says Luke, "were seized with great fear and asked Jesus to leave them."

Why fear? Communities have a way of learning to live with demonic forces, isolating and even partially controlling them from time to time. New England co-existed just fine with witches. America in the 1950s with Communists. At the risk of "spiritualizing" the story one astute commentator says that by spending time contending with the man with the demons the people were able to keep the focus off of their own lives.

But now that Jesus' power for working good has taken away the place where evil was thought to reside—in the life of this sorry individual—the old balance of roles and control, the system of good and evil implodes before their very eyes.

If the man we all thought was the permanent habitation of evil is made well there's no telling what God will do next in our community. The question lurks in everyone's mind as they see this previously raving madman now sitting, clothed and in his right mind at the feet of Jesus. 'With no one standing between me and God maybe I'm next,' they're thinking.

What wrong will be righted, what life made clean, what relationship whole and well? Having to face my own peccadilloes is a scary thought. Maybe I'm not ready to give up my little vices or larger sins. Perhaps such questions tumbled through the hearts of those at the empty tomb in Mark's Gospel and were the reason for the 'running fear' Easter produces.

The healing of the madman presents a few challenges to the city. One, facing their fears and, two, economic loss. Jesus' healing causes a real expense for this community. The swineherds, not pleased with the loss of their pigs, lobby hard to pin the blame on Jesus.

The implication of the story is something like this: any time people take the Gospel to heart, find healing, embrace a new ethic and re-distribution of resources the whole system of getting and spending is affected.

The Gerasene people rather than praising God that their brother has been healed are counting the cost and they find it too much. Their economic scale is based not on abundance but scarcity: the notion that there isn't enough to go around for everyone so we have to get ours while we can; instead of the alternate view that God has blessed creation with renewable resources so that there can always more than enough for everyone.

You see even though this story is about a man to whom perhaps few of us think we can relate, Luke shrewdly prevents us from conveniently distancing ourselves from him. Each and every one of us is in need of the healing power of Jesus. No one in this story can sidestep His power and authority.

For if we do not find ourselves connecting with this man in his illness, then by definition we are among his neighbors who have a vested interest in making sure the chains used to secure him will do their job. Luke raises the question for his readers then and now, “are we the community that benefits from someone else’s illness by using their problems to avoid looking at our own?” If we complain loud enough about who’s to blame—the President or big business or the Chinese or my quirky sibling or crazy neighbor—chances are our little garden of sin will go unnoticed.

But the Gospel calls us to the new life in Christ. All are offered the healing power of Jesus; each and everyone is given the opportunity to become whole and well. Yet, sometimes, truth be told, the process seems too uncertain and scary and we pull back from sticker shock.

We’ve been talking these past weeks about coordinates for new life. Today the coordinates are Christ’s power and authority in heaven and earth and under the earth.

Those are reassuring words for a congregation baptizing precious children at a precarious moment in world history; those are reassuring words for a congregation commissioning teenagers for the challenges and rigors of mission in rural Maine; and those are reassuring words for a congregation conducting its annual meeting, steering the ship of this church into the future.

Perhaps you find yourself in some circumstance or condition of life today or know of someone who is and consider these circumstances beyond the reach of even Christ; or maybe you think this condition not worthy of Christ’s attention—why would he bother himself with matters so insignificant when greater suffering is everywhere to be found.

Far from a relic today’s Gospel is as relevant as the bible gets. Fear not, says Luke, he comes to individuals and congregations in their darkest hour and deepest need and releases us from all that holds us back and keeps us broken. Perhaps as we face this day we can remember Luther’s great hymn, “The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure, one little word shall fell him.”

And the man from whom the demons had gone out begged that he might be with Jesus: but he sent him away, saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”

So the man went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. So may it be for you and me. Amen.