

“On the Edges of Humanity” Sermon on Sunday, June 19, 2022

Dear church,

One of the spookiest stories of the Bible is offered to us in the gospel reading for this Sunday. And these stories, sometimes you have to simply picture them! Can you see this as the opening scene of a horror movie? I can. Jesus, going ashore on the other side of the lake, is met by a person who wears no clothes, maybe a rag, maybe nothing, who had been living in a cave and probably hadn't seen a bath for some time. Here was someone removed from the normal standards of civilization, someone wild. On top of that, Luke says that this man was “possessed,” unpredictable and perceived as dangerous. Would you want to meet this man?

I recently watched the 2021 movie “Nightmare Alley” in which a wandering carnival from the 1940's runs a cruel show called “Men or Beast.” The carnival keeps a man under horrible conditions, dehumanizes him and turns him into a spectacle for public entertainment. Disturbing as it was to watch the carnival owner's treatment of the poor creature, I sort of picture the man mentioned in Luke 8 as being in a similar condition. It was probably hard to recognize the humanity in him. People were scared. They perceived him more beast than man and kept him under locks. And maybe he was a local spectacle.

Now something interesting happens. Upon seeing Jesus, the man immediately begs to be spared and asks not to be tortured. I always interpreted this to mean that the demon or spirit in him was scared to be thrown out by Jesus, which is also supported by Luke's commentary. But now I wonder about something else: had this man been tortured before? We know that the early mental institutions even in our more advanced country and probably in most other parts of the world as well, could be quite cruel. People did not know what to do with severe cases of mental dysregulation. And as a result, sufferers were often confined, kept in isolation and deprived of certain necessities. In some cases, residents were even used for medical experiments. Also, quite often these suffering people had been abused before, in the communities where they came from, by people

who were afraid of them. So, the words that we hear out of the mouth of this man were not so unreasonable: "Don't torture me!"

Of course, it remains obscure who is talking here: the spirits inside of him, the man himself or both in some way? Given his state of mind it was hard to draw a clear line. As Jesus engages the spirits who call themselves "legion," an indicator of multiple possessions, they negotiate and ask to be released into a nearby herd of pigs. Pigs were considered impure and the meat of pigs un-kosher in the Jewish communities; but these herds belonged to the Gentile communities that lived on that side of the lake. Jesus gave the spirits permission to relocate in a bizarre negotiation with the spirit world, and the pigs get so riled up by these spirit forces that they rush down a steep bank into the deep waters of the lake and drown. The owners were not very happy about the collateral damage and they ask Jesus to leave immediately even though a human life was saved. But we don't know how people in the community truly felt about that. Had they even regarded this person as salvageable?

What do we make of this story? Here is a confession: in the past I have often tried to avoid the demon narratives of the New Testament. They seem so antiquated. Don't we have a different language for those manifestations called in the NT "demons" in our day? Multiple personality disorder, schizophrenia and the like... Is this story a throw-back to so-called primitive religion? Well, not so fast! Earlier this year I watched some tape of Dick Schwartz's Internal Family Systems sessions. It was part of my therapy education. And guess what? What this modern, cutting-edge therapist did, the methodology he developed, was in fact not so different from this gospel story. Well, there were no pigs involved in Dick Schwartz's session. But he engaged with parts of his clients' personas. He had them speak to them as separate parts of themselves. And all of it leads to the method of "unburdening," in which the therapist appeases, soothes and integrates the voices deep inside a person. Yes, it is still every different from the New Testament accounts but similarities cannot be denied either. And what else would we call Jesus' action here but a major, powerful unburdening of this human being?

What all this tells us is this: every human being is complex. There are various voices and tendencies inside each of us, and we are always busy to keep them together, integrated. When that happens we are in touch with our soul. We know who we are. When it doesn't happen and people get pulled into different directions, they lose that sense of self. In the best understanding of religion and faith, God helps us to be whole and live wholesomely so that the different parts of ourselves don't take off and separate. What this story also tells us is that we are not always fully in charge of our own lives. Sometimes we do get pulled away from ourselves by addiction or compulsion or fear or significant events in our life, family history and the like. And what may feel like torture, the recognition of negative forces within us, can, in the hands of God and in the hands of a good therapist or counselor be the beginning of a major unburdening: finding our soul, finding our true self, finding peace, finding God. There is nothing ancient about it. It's what the gospel is about. It's what Christ is about. A savior we call him.

Amen.