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6/20/2010, Pentecost 4C
Isaiah 65:1-9, Luke 8:26-39
Saving a Fellow in Desperate Trouble

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁷And when [Jesus] went forth to land, there met him out of the city a certain man, which had devils long time, and ware no clothes, neither abode in any house, but in the tombs. (Luke 8:27, KJV)

This is a story of Jesus saving a fellow who is in desperate shape. You might have your own fair share of troubles these days. I hope not. I hope that you are enjoying a season of spiritual peace. But even if you do have troubles, I sure hope they are not as bad as this poor man's. Aye, you might have inner and outer struggles, but at least no one has locked you up and thrown away the key, for here you sit, in church, in your right mind, with the affection of your brothers and sisters in the Lord. You do not wander around with no clothes. You are not forced to dwell in tombs.

Again, you might feel that there is within you a kind of chaos eager to break forth, a ruination just waiting to happen. Demon bottle might have you. Lust might ride you, with cruel bit and bridle. You might feel that there is in you a down-bound train determined to do you harm and others as well. You might feel that you are riveted down by bad habits, scorched by passions, chained by vices, and yet here you are, with some measure of peace and self-mastery. You might have sunk low, but I bet you have not sunk as low as this poor man in the Gospel story. There is within his soul a hurricane of disorder.

Just a few verses earlier in Luke 8, we can read the story of Jesus calming the storm on the sea. Jesus sleeps in the boat in the midst of the storm, but the disciples know they are in jeopardy and so they awaken their Lord:

And they came to him, and awoke him, saying, Master, master, we perish. (Luke 8:24, KJV)

They do well to calm him "Master," for that he is. He is master even of the wind and the waves. And so Jesus calms the storm:

Then he arose, and rebuked the wind and the raging of the water: and they ceased, and there was a calm. (Luke 8:24, KJV)

This is indeed a great miracle. But this poor man in today's Gospel story has a wild storm compressed and unleashed within his soul. He has a tempest brewing within his heart and within his head. I do not know how he got himself into such

troubles, but I do know the One who can get him out. I mean our Savior Jesus. Those who are well need no physician, Jesus said. This man is not well. He needs a physician indeed, and Jesus proves to be his Great Physician of body and soul. And if your case should be as bad as his, our Savior is strong enough and good enough to save you too.

This is my theme, this is my song, this is my sermon for today: Though you should feel yourself to be wretched and in bondage to sin, like the poor man in this morning's Gospel story, nonetheless our Saviour Jesus is strong enough and good enough to save you and give you a better life in this world.

To develop this theme, let me step back a ways, to get a larger perspective on things. In this morning's First Lesson, from Isaiah Chapter 65, the Lord testifies to his yearning for his people. Like one who has lost his heart to others, the Lord continually calls out to them:

I said, "Here I am, *here I am*," to a nation that did not call on my name.
²I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; (Isaiah 65:1-2, RSV)

This reading from Chapter 65 is near the end of the book, but this theme of the Lord calling out to his people recurs throughout the book. Going backwards ten chapters to Isaiah 55, we still find the Lord crying out to his people. He cries out, like a lonely man trying to catch someone's attention, for he has something very good to offer:

¹"Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Harken diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness. ³Incline your ear, and come to me; *hear, that your soul may live*; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. (Isaiah 55:1-3, RSV)

Going backwards farther, we find again that the crying out of the Lord to his people is the great theme of Chapter 40, with the divine instruction to Isaiah:

¹Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40:1-2, RSV)

Indeed, going all the way to the First Chapter of Isaiah, we find no stony silence in the Lord, but rather an appeal that his people should listen to him, for in not listening, they go wrong:

²Hear, O heavens, and *give ear*, O earth; for the LORD *has spoken*:
“Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.
³The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does
not know, my people does not understand.” (Isaiah 1:2-3, RSV)

So that is the First Chapter of Isaiah. From beginning to end, the Lord cries out to his people.

And if we enlarge the perspective even more, we find the reason for the Lord’s call to his people. He *loves* them! He loves them, and love cannot remain silent, neither in face of sadness in his people nor in face of sin.

That is why God created us in the first place. He created us because he loves life and wants that there should be creatures to enjoy it. He does not create in order to fulfill some deficiency in himself. A farmer might create a plow to help with the farm work. A carpenter might create a hammer to help with the carpentry. But the Lord does not make us to somehow help himself along, for he is already perfect, even without us:

¹⁰For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. ¹¹I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. ¹²If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. (Psalm 50:10-12, KJV)

God creates because of love. In a recent theology lecture, my friend David Yeago used a beautiful phrase from St. Anselm to explain why God made us in the first place: “God creates out of sheer exuberance.” God does not create in order to gain for himself. His glory is a creature living in a certain way. His delight is that other beings should flourish, that they should have fullness of life.

And the thing about the poor Gerasene demoniac is that he does not have fullness of life! The man is at low ebb. And is it any wonder, then, that Jesus rescues the man. He might not be an Israelite, but he is a human being, and Jesus would have him flourish. In the presence of Jesus, it is not long before the demons flee the man and leave him sitting peaceful and in his right mind at the feet of Jesus.

So it can be for you and me if we should be beset by sin. For sin is madness. It tends in that direction. When sin takes possession of the soul, it agitates that soul, making it wild and heedless of rules and principles, exhortations and virtues. It would break every bond of civilization if it could get away with it, just as the demoniac broke the bonds by which the people of the city would restrain him. As St. John Chrysostom once said about the demoniac, the sinner is like him, tending to turn everything upside down:

For so when any man is dissolute, eager after all embraces, he differs not at all from the demoniac, but goes about naked like him, clad indeed

in garments, but deprived of the true covering, and stripped of his proper glory; cutting himself not with stones, but with sins more hurtful than many stones. Who then shall be able to bind such a one? Who, to stay his unseemliness and frenzy, his way of never coming to himself, but forever haunting the tombs? ...? And all too that imitate him, like fierce wild beasts escaped from their cage, trouble their cities, no man restraining them. For these also have bonds upon them on every side; such as the fears of the judges, the threatening of the laws, the condemnation of the multitude, and other things more than these; yet bursting asunder even these, they turn all things upside down. (Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew 8:28-34)

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord: as Jesus was strong and good to save the demoniac in today's Gospel story, so he lives and desires to save you and me too, whatever the demons that haunt us. He is willing to begin here and now to save us. It might be a process that does not reach completion till heaven, but it is certainly a process that can make life better for us and for our loved ones even here and now.

As Jesus spoke against the demons in the Gerasene, so he speaks against any demons in us. You have heard him speak many a time. Against the demon of hatred, for example, he says,

⁴³Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. ⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:43-44, KJV)

Against the mean spirit of revenge, Jesus cries out:

³⁸Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: ³⁹But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:38-39, KJV)

Against the tyrannous spirit of lust, Jesus has long been preaching:

²⁷Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: ²⁸But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Matthew 5:27, KJV)

Shelter not the sin within you from such divine preaching. Do not let the exhortations of Jesus enter one ear and go out the other leaving you unmoved by them. But take such preaching to heart. As John Paul II said in *Veritatis Splendor*,

“God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love proposes this good to man in the commandments.” So, remember the commandments and let them have space in your life.

Furthermore, avail yourselves of prayer and of the Holy Communion and of the fellowship of your brothers and sisters in the Lord. They too know something of your struggles. Life has taught them things and they might be able to help you along.

And do not despise counselors and therapists and psychiatrists and AA groups, but rather think of them as being God’s angels sent to you to help drive out the demons and to leave the man in clear mind sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Well, our Gospel story has a rather disappointing ending. I mean, the villagers see the man well, but ask his Savior to leave. What! Do they imagine that they are not in some measure kin to that demoniac who so troubled their community in the past? These people who sent Jesus away, do they not realized that they are doing themselves harm, for they participate in the madness of sin too, and so also need the demoniac’s Savior.

Jesus does not contend with them. He simply goes. Glad to say, he urges the former demoniac to remain with his village and to witness to him. In that way, those villagers have a chance to become even better people than they are.

This being Father’s Day, I close with this nice picture. I see the father of the demoniac receiving back his son. I see him rejoice as did the father of the Prodigal Son:

²²But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: ²³And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: ²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. (Luke 15:22-24, KJV)

Many a time that father had been at his wits end trying to help his son. Things had gone from bad to worst, so that the community had bound his son, and the boy ended up alone, dwelling in the tombs, leaving broken hearts for mother and father.

But now, Jesus has ministered to the boy, and father and mother receive back their son whole. No matter who we are, men or women, children or elderly folk, I bet there is someone in this world who has been praying for us, someone who has been longing for us to get better, someone who has been suffering even as we have suffered from our sins. God made us out of sheer exuberance. He made us to have fullness of life. And both our Maker and our neighbors are going to be very glad when we let Jesus have his way with us. To the one who calms storms on the sea and in the soul be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.