

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/19/2016, The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 12
Isaiah 65:1-9, Luke 8:26-39

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

My opening text portrays the poor man in this morning's Gospel story – the one called “the Gerasene demoniac.” Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee and is visiting Gentile territory. There he encounters this poor fellow:

²⁷And as [Jesus] stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons; for a long time he had worn no clothes, and he lived not in a house but among the tombs. (Luke 8:27, RSV)

Who knows how long the man had been in this wretched state? Perhaps for years. But one day, Jesus crossed the Galilean Sea and met this man. That was a good day for him – a very good day. It will be a good day for us too one day when we meet Jesus, and he leaves us calm, collected, and in our right mind – more right than maybe our minds have ever been before.

In this section of St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus is contending with the enemies of humanity. Earlier in our chapter – Chapter Eight – Jesus has calmed the storm on the sea. It left the disciples in awe:

And they being afraid wondered, saying one to another, What manner of man is this! for he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him. (Luke 8:25, KJV)

Later in our Chapter Eight, Jesus will heal a woman suffering from a long-lasting hemorrhage, and then he will raise back to life a twelve-year-old girl, restoring her to her parents (Luke 8:55). Wherever Jesus goes in this Chapter Eight, he is defeating our foes, our human foes. Natural calamities like storms on the sea, demon-possession with its terrible mental illness, sickness, and even death all yield before the commands of our Saviour Jesus, glad to say.

I find it interesting that this chapter speaks so little of blame or of the origins of the misery. Jesus does not stop to ask about the storm on the sea. He knows the ins-and-outs of his creation, and surely he could have explained to his disciples all the relevant factors – the plunging barometric pressure, the sudden strengthening of the winds disastrously intermixed with the shifting of the tides, and so on – a dangerous conglomeration that frightened even experienced fishermen like the disciples. But Jesus does not stop to explain the storm. He simply wakes up from his place in the stern of the boat, and commands the storm to cease:

And they came to him, and awoke him, saying, Master, master, we perish. 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)

Likewise, Jesus does not ask whether the Gerasene demoniac bears some measure of blame for the plight he is in. Nor does he ask the sick people he cured about their diet and exercise. Nor does he ask the parents about their childcare of their daughter. He does not delay with questions of blame or origin of the suffering, but rather saves everyone in sight. The storm, the hemorrhage, the death of the child, and the anguish of the demoniac all fade away before the healing touch of Jesus.

So that is Luke Chapter 8. Jesus defeats the foes of humanity, never pausing to ask about whether the sufferer bears some measure of blame for his or her woes. And that seems right for Jesus in his role as the Great Physician of body and soul. The immediate need is to rescue the person from the dangers of this world – from the storms of life, from sickness, from mental disease, and from death.

So, in speaking about this poor man in this morning's Bible story, I mean to follow the lead of our chapter. Jesus does not ask how the man got into this misery. Neither will I. The man suffers, terribly. Let's simply enjoy the victory of Jesus over the torment of this sufferer, and pray for such victory for all sufferers.

Especially I am drawn to one facet of the demoniac's wretchedness. I mean this business about how the townsfolk tried to restrain him with "chains and fetters":

... he was kept under guard, and bound with chains and fetters, but he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the desert. (Luke 8:29, RSV)

It puts me in mind of Samson. Samson was strong like that. He could not be bound – at least in days of his strength.

... and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him [upon Samson], and the ropes which were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. (Judges 15:14, RSV)

But there is a big difference between the strength of the demoniac in this morning's story and that of Samson of old. The difference has to do with the spirit that filled the man. In the case of Samson, it was the Spirit of the Lord that strengthened him. That Holy Spirit came mightily upon him, so that he could not be bound. But in the case of the demoniac, it was the rebellious spirits that burst his fetters. Lots of rebellious spirits!

³⁰Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Legion”; for *many* demons had entered him.

How many? Well, when the demons fled the man and entered the herd of pigs, they so appalled the pigs that they ran down the hill and plunged into the sea, and there were *two thousand* of those poor animals. There were enough demons in the man that they drove two thousand pigs insane, so that they all united and plunged to their death. You or I might have a thing or two that is hard in life for us. But Legion had many, many demons in him. It is no wonder he lived in the tombs, away from the community. Who would want such a man nearby? What a pathetic life the man must have had!

But see the man now!

³⁵Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus, and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind... (Luke 8:35, RSV)

Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, did that: she sat at the feet of Jesus, as a disciple sits at the feet of a great teacher, hungry for the Word of God. So it is with Legion. He has been set free by Jesus. Now he sits calmly before his Saviour. He would go with Jesus if he could, but Jesus bids him to return to his house and to preach the gospel in his homeland. Return to his house – not to the tombs, not to the graveyard – but to his house. It is time for Legion to return to society and to bless society with what he has learned of Jesus.

The freedom that the demons had given Legion when they burst his chains and fetters was a fake freedom. It was a tormenting freedom. Indeed, it was no freedom at all, but rather a prolongation of the misery in which the man lived day by day. That is what demons do. They promise freedom and expansion of experience, but in reality they cripple life, diminish life, and make people into burdens on the world. Demon drink, demon sex, demon greed, whatever the devilish impulses pushing people around: they drain people of freedom and dignity bit by bit. A man will never be free, a woman will never be free, until he takes on the yoke of Christ. Until we bind and fetter ourselves with Jesus and his Spirit, we will be slaves of various forces in life – not all of whom are godly.

This all puts me in mind of two of Martin Luther’s most famous sentences. He speaks of the freedom and of the slavery of a Christian:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.¹

¹The Freedom of a Christian, 1520.

These sentences are in the declarative mood, but also they are imperatives. They are appeals to us, from Martin Luther, but even more from Luther's Savior, Jesus Christ. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none," means that we are to throw off the yoke of unchristian spirits. If we have let bad habits take hold of us, if we have somehow authorized ourselves from time to time to dabble in madness or vice, if we have succumbed to laziness and the dribbling away of our talents and opportunities, well it is time to turn all that around, because a Christian is to be "free lord of all, subject to none." And then, going the other way round, a Christian is to be a "servant of all, subject to all," incapable of indifference toward humanity, restless and ill-at-ease until we are helping others in this world. It is to be with us as it was with Saint Paul who gives this stirring testimony:

... though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. (1 Corinthians 9:19, NRSV)

It was a good day for Legion when Jesus came along. Jesus entering his life meant calmness, sanity, and good work for him to do henceforth – the good work of trying to draw others to the One who had saved him, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.