

Second Sunday after Pentecost
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Mind over Bacon

If we thought about it, we might realize how vulnerable our food supply is. It seems like every few months there is a recall on something. Romaine Lettuce, peppers, lettuce again, fruits, peanut butter, the list goes on. We may be advanced, but in many ways our supply chains are as vulnerable as there were years ago. I don't know about you, but I think the worst recall I could ever imagine—with apologies to the vegetarians—would be a shortage of bacon. Imagine going to store after store looking for bacon only to be told that they are out, and do not expect to restock for the better part of a year. Wow! No bacon at any price, the horror of it. Now imagine that you find out that the shortage was due to the actions of a single person. I know right? You would want that person fired—frankly, they may not be too safe almost anywhere. The “baconator” would find few friends in America—where we consume some 24+ billion pounds of that crunchy, salty goodness a year.

In today's Gospel, Jesus cures a man by driving the demons from him and into a herd of swine. Hey, Jesus was Jewish, so pork seemed of little value to him—a harmless act considering the alternatives. But this was a village with Gentiles, and their whole supply of bacon had just drowned itself at His hand. No wonder they asked Jesus to leave. Did you notice that in the Gospel the demons all recognize Jesus as the Christ? They know exactly who Jesus is. Yet, the disciples and the people around him remain confused. The person in front of them, fully human and fully divine is a mystery, and they are surprisingly ungrateful for the healing Jesus is doing. When we do not understand something, we tend to fear it—we are hard wired to step away from things we do not understand—it is part of our sense of self preservation. The people see Jesus healing, and instead of living into the wonder of the miracles before them, they ask Jesus to leave. When we do not understand something, we want to ignore it, we want it to go away and pretend it does not exist—like the check engine light in the car, or maybe more like algebra. Our lives would just be easier if we did not have to deal with algebra. Algebra requires work, and life is hard enough without having to figure that out. We just want to be about the business of going about our business.

The people of the town were just like us, often preferring the “devil” they know, over the “devil” they do not know. They had a social order, they knew their place and they knew the place of the demonized man. But now, here he is in town, with them and they will need to be well, civil, nice, and deal with him differently. They have a new social equation to solve. I imagine them saying, “Why can't things have just stayed the same? We would still have bacon!” *“Legion” has been expelled from the man, but the memory of Legion still controls the behavior of the people in his community.* So much change in one day, as Winnie, the Pooh says, “Oh bother.”

The commentaries I read about this Gospel, lead me to understand that is not a simple healing miracle story, because our ears are not hearing in the same way someone from *the ancient Roman world would hear it. For example, the name of the demon is “Legion.” At that time, legion had only one literal meaning: a unit of approximately 6,000 Roman soldiers—the occupying army. Suddenly, an exorcism takes on social and political significance. Luke's*

word choices throughout the story are telling. When the demon “seizes” the man, it is the same verb used in Acts when Christians are arrested and brought to trial. The words for the hand and foot chains, for binding and guarding, are also the same ones that Luke uses in Acts when the disciples are imprisoned. The bottom line is that the language of the whole episode evokes the experience of living under a brutal occupying power.

The good news is that *Jesus casts out every power that prevents us from living fully and freely as human beings created in God’s image.* Jesus claims us, our souls, and our lives here on earth. Our challenge is being willing to accept His claim—all of it. It is easy to say we give our souls to God, because we do not really understand our soul in earthly terms. We pray, “Save my soul so I will go to heaven.” We mean, “When I am done doing whatever I want on earth.” But this is a package deal, Jesus claiming our souls and our Earthly lives. We need to live into our Christian identity, to break the chains that bind us to our overwhelming need to put our wants and desires ahead of our call to be loving children of God. It is easier to hate than to love, to keep than to give, shun than accept. Freedom is dangerous, and costly. It is difficult to understand that some people who are freed from prison end up back in jail. It is not because they failed to reform, but because freedom carries a price with it of conformity, a demon may have been *expelled from them, but the memory of it still controls their behavior,* and sends them back to the “devil” they know. It is easier for them to be who we say they are, and live chained in a familiar place.

We surmise that when someone in Jesus’ day showed signs of what we call mental illness, they assumed it was caused by demons. We can now explain the mental illness with science, but some still choose to hold that there are in fact demons that possess people. Choose what you will, Jesus cured a man with mental illness, or Jesus expelled a bunch of demons, but hang onto this fact: a miracle occurred.

The disciples saw all Jesus had done—they did not understand most of it. Just prior to coming here, they were in the boat when Jesus quieted the storm and they had asked, “*Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?*” It is after this, that they sailed to the region of Gerasene, and were confronted by the demon-possessed man. The man had lost his identity to the demons in his mind. The disciples lost themselves on how cool they believed Jesus was. He could do anything—even become the king, overthrow the legion of Romans, make them rich and famous, sitting on His right side and His left. They were of course misguided—not possessed but obsessed. The man, Jesus healed was battling his demons so long, he may not have known where his identity ended, and the possession began. We can all lose ourselves to many things when we forget who we are, and whose we are. We need to free ourselves and live into the wonder of who God has created us to be! Maya Angelou said it best, “*If you’re always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.*”

A lot of people have been traumatized and are haunted and tortured by memories. We all have our demons. To overcome them, we need to first take the plank out of our own eye. There will always be people who oppress and occupy, and injustice will thrive as long as power corrupts. We can only control our thoughts and our actions. *Jesus calls us to live fully and freely, and He challenges us to stand with and for each other, brothers and sisters in Christ.*

If you are going to examine your faith and life, you have to learn to love the questions. “How do we overcome our demons?” We seek God and ask for help. Where do we find God? Well, we know from Kings, that God was not in the wind; not in the earthquake; and not in the fire;

but perhaps God is in *the sound of silence*. Find where God is dwelling within you. Go and sit quietly, be still, listen, and then, trusting what you hear, take action. We all need to save ourselves from our demons by taking the first step to ask for help from God and each other, and then to trust that help will come. Living a life of faith and trust is not easy, and we may never get all the answers—but it is worth effort. Kallistos Ware, an English Bishop and theologian of the Eastern Orthodox Church put it this way, “...*it is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.*”

The Gerasenes beg Jesus to leave them. Jesus goes away, but not before commanding the man to return to the city and explain what God has done for him. The man obeys, spreading far and wide the good news about the mighty work that God is doing in Jesus. He was the first apostle, and all of us should follow his lead. The voices in our heads do not have the last word. God claims us, and we are restored when we proclaim that we are God’s beloved children. We are Baptized. Go, Live into the wonder of who God created you to be—be amazing. Spread the good news of God’s work in you through Jesus, and then stand with and for each other, and I will do the same. Amen

Some concepts and quotes were taken from the following commentaries:

- *Feasting on the Word*, Barbara Brown Taylor
- *The Communicator’s Commentary*, Roger L. Fredrikson
- https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4108

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a

Psalm 42 and 43

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39