



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 2 – Proper 7 (C)

#### Categories

**[RCL] 1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39**

This is a sermon about the Gerasene Demoniac. It's about time somebody wrote one. This story doesn't get a lot of attention from pulpits these days, and that's a shame. There's some really good stuff here, and it's pretty funny if you come at it from the right angle. Also, it's very handy to have it coupled with Paul's words in Galatians. The two readings help each other.

First of all, we need to look at the issue that seems to get in the way of engaging this story these last few centuries—those poor, doomed demons. The fact is, the New Testament world had a different way of seeing reality than we do, or that the 10<sup>th</sup> century did, or that the 17<sup>th</sup> century did. They each put their common experiences of the world into different categories. That is, they gave their experiences different descriptions, different labels. And we can be confident that, in just a handful of decades, there will be still different ways of seeing and organizing the world—the same experiences, different categories, different ways of naming and organizing the stuff we all experience. These days, we don't much do demons—we don't really have a category for that. That's OK. It's not a big deal, and it's sure not worth all the effort folks put into trying to force this square peg into the round hole of our current categories. Instead of fussing about that, let's see what's going on here, and let's see where the good news is.

On one really important level, the story is a hoot: It's somewhere between a political cartoon and a graphic novel. The whole scene is bizarre. You've got a naked guy acting bizarre, chatty demons, charging pigs doing swan dives, tombs, chains, shackles, freaked-out locals, and a small riot. All in Gentile territory where, as far as most Jews were concerned, Jesus had no business being in the first place.

The folks who first heard this story must have loved it. In addition to the great action and dialogue, there was the ancient regional rivalry between Israel and her neighbors, who they generally didn't like—and with the Romans, who *everybody* hated.

What could be more fun for the good Jews of Galilee than to hear a story about how unclean, unlucky, and generally weird those Gentiles on the other side of the lake really were—and about how all those unclean pigs came to a well-deserved and hilarious end. Image the scene—nobody comes out looking good except the fellow who was healed.

Then there's the political subtext. Everybody knew instantly that it was no accident that the demons called themselves Legion—after the famous and feared Roman Legions. Everybody also knew that pigs were not only unclean to the Jews but were also a staple of both the Roman army and the Roman economy. However, Caesar's Legions and Caesar's rations and Caesar's wealth were mere child's play for Jesus—a quick flush and they're gone. What fun. And if any Romans heard the story, they probably wouldn't even get that part.

But, as delightful as all this is, the story is much more than a mildly comic interlude in Jesus' ministry. It's really good news, and it's good news about power—all sorts of power. The Gerasene Demoniac appears just after the more familiar account of Jesus calming the storm on the lake. In fact, the storm was during the very trip that took Jesus and the disciples to the country of the Gerasenes. Both of these accounts—the storm and the pigs—and several more, are part of Luke's run-up to the big question Jesus asks his disciples in the next chapter: “Who do you say that I am?” All of these stories are hints about what the right answer to that question is—these are not so much stories about what Jesus did, as they are about who Jesus is. And who Jesus is has to do with power. It has to do with the question of which, of all the powers in the universe—regardless of what categories we use to talk about them—which of all these are the strongest. Which powers will have the last word?

There really are a lot of powers out there; powers that can and do hurt and isolate and torment and destroy, in all sorts of ways. The categories we use to describe them don't really matter that much. Whether we live in a world full of demons or schizophrenia, of storm-gods or indifferent natural laws, of possession or of illness—regardless of the categories we use, we live in a dangerous world, a frightening world. It's a world that seems at both first *and* second glance to be pretty much against us. We live in a world that doesn't seem to care about us or our pain. We know this all too well.

The story of the Gerasene Demoniac, like the story of the calming of the sea, like so many of the other stories about what Jesus did—about who Jesus is—these stories are ways of saying that, of all of those powers out there, regardless of how we name them or organize them, in spite of how terribly real they are and how awful they are—none of them is ultimately powerful. None of them has or will have the last word, none of them will ultimately prevail. In the end, when all is said and done, we are cared for and cared about. In the end, the power that Jesus brings, the power of obedient, self-sacrificing love, the power we see most clearly on the cross, *that* power will prevail. And his victory is ours by gift.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what is lined up against us. Notice how the Gerasene Demoniac had much more to worry about than his demons. He was also a pariah, cut off from family, friends, community, relationships—from all of those connections that together weave the fabric of our very humanity. That isolation, that apart-ness, was also the victory of powers, powers we humans create, powers that can destroy as effectively and as completely as madness or a storm.

Still, by the time Jesus got through with him, our Demoniac was on the other side of those as well.

He was not only in his right mind, but he was, as they say, dressed appropriately, and Jesus told him to go to his home, a home he didn't have when our story began. He was given the fullness of his life back. Remember, there are all sorts of powers out there, and all sorts of victories.

Now for a bit of an aside, that leads us to St. Paul. In our Baptismal Covenant, Christians promise to “renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.” This can be confusing. Note well that we are not skipping back 2,000 years and using the same categories that the New Testament uses. We don't see the “evil powers of this world” as critters from hell, servants of the devil, that magically mess with us. There isn't a racism demon, or a hunger-causing demon, or an oppression-causing demon, or a money demon. These evil powers we renounce are modern categories, they are human things, things of this world. They are institutions, systems, learned behaviors, traditions and values, or simply habits, that end up corrupting and destroying the creatures of God. These we must identify, renounce, and resist if we are to fulfill our calling as Christians.

All of this is part of what Paul is talking about when he insists that, in Christ, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.” Notice how we sometimes still use the same categories the New Testament uses to talk about powers—here it's the powers of separation based on sex, race, and social class. Paul is saying that these distinctions and others, these powers of the social, economic, ecclesiastical, and political structures—as ancient, hallowed, destructive, and potent as they were, and as they still are—these are powers that *will* fall, and that even now *are* falling, before Jesus. Their voices are not the strongest voices, and they, too will not have the last word. It is our vocation to oppose them, and by God's grace they should not, and ultimately they cannot, separate, isolate, define, or destroy us.

Because the love that Jesus is and the love that Jesus brings, this love is stronger than anything, even the worst, the very worst, that the world can throw at us.

That's who Jesus is—that's what these stories are all about, that's the meta-narrative, regardless of the categories and the worldviews we use to talk about them. And that is very good news.

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