

## **Year C-Pentecost 2-Proper7-2019-Demoniac Voices Thrown Out**

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**Thomas L. Truby**

**Luke 8:26-39**

### **Demoniac Voices Thrown Out**

Way back when I was just beginning my ministry in a training program called Clinical Pastoral Education I was assigned to the Biggs Building of Missouri's huge Fulton State Mental Hospital. The Biggs Building was where Missouri stored its criminally insane and my job was to serve as chaplain by going into the prison and relating to the patients. There were several hundred of them endlessly sitting on their wards, rocking, smoking and watching television, all under the vigilant eye of the guards also known as the hospital staff.

As chaplain I decided to take a tall, younger African-American man who appeared to sleep all the time and relate to no one, back to my office where we could talk. With great effort I managed to get a few words out of him though I can't remember what we talked about. This went on for several weeks. Finally, Dick Rummel, my CPE supervisor, found out about it. He was furious with me; angry that I had not mentioned what I was doing to him, angry that I had endangered myself and angry that I did not seem to understand the value of supervision. He forbid me from ever seeing this man alone again and threatened to pull me from the Biggs Building. He was afraid the demons lurking inside this burned-out schizophrenic would be triggered by our conversation and he might suddenly turn on me and kill me. I didn't know this then but the year before a young psychologist had been beaten to death in his office in the Biggs Building under similar circumstances. Undoubtedly the demons had suddenly escaped their abyss of forgetfulness and repression and expressed themselves in the violence they poured down on the psychologist who had hooked them in his therapeutic conversation. No wonder Dick Rummel was alarmed when he heard what I had done.

The man full of demons was not an alien, stranger or outsider to the Gerasene network of relationships, in fact, as we will soon discover, he was integral to it. We Girardians believe all humans are formed by the other—other people, the culture in which we were raised, the other as the time in which we lived. In describing people we say "He is a product of his time," or he was shaped by the austerity and spaciousness of the land he lived in," or "Growing up white in the rural south he was a racist but didn't know it." So the legion of demons describes the mob of voices sounding off in the demoniac's head as he looked at the world. This mob of voices, contentious and rivalrous, for him and mostly against him, came from those around him. This is why the demon possessed man is described as being from the city of Gerasa—he is the

expression of those voices the community doesn't want to face in itself and had pushed into him. If he weren't there they would have no place to put their discord with each other and that would endanger their community, threatening it with implosion. To put it simply, they needed someone to blame.

That's also why it was dangerous to have Jesus, the healer, around. He might heal the person they need to stabilize their community. Jesus, go away! We don't want you messing with our stable community—stabilized as it is through the suffering of our victims, our demoniacs, our homeless, beating on themselves and living among the tombs.

On Thursday night we went to see the movie "Rocket Man," the story of Elton John, the famous Rock singer. The movie starts with Elton going to a rehab program in mid-career where he tells his group that he is addicted in multiple ways and hates his life though he is viewed as an incredible success by the world. We then go back in time to his childhood in London where we see that his beautiful mother was not able to be interested in him and dismisses his interests, talents and need for love though he tries very hard to win it. His father, equally dismissive and self-preoccupied constantly fights with his narcissistic wife and soon leaves the marriage without ever saying goodbye to his young, only-child-son, Elton, who was an exquisitely sensitive person. The grandmother was the only redeeming figure in his drab life. She loves him, believes in him, invests in him and takes him to his piano lessons when they discover his prodigious musical ability. As he tells his story to his AA group we see where his demons came from. Throughout the telling he is dressed in an outlandish red costume that sets him apart like the man possessed by demons in Luke's story; a story to which we will now return.

"Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God?'"

Gil Bailey says this is a tremendously powerful question, for this man, as we will find out, is what the Greeks called the *pharmakos*, (yes, the word from which "pharmacy" comes) the designated outcast who makes the system work. Everybody else gets to feel better about themselves because of this fellow. He's the lowest person in the community, the periodic scapegoat, the key to their social functioning. So what does Jesus have to do with this man? He is there to free him from his role in the community so that he can sit in peace and be of a right mind.

The wild man of Gerasa is the kept scapegoat. Periodically, at the prompting of his own madness, or the prompting of his community, or some combination of the two, he goes into a

fit. It is repetitive and ritualistic. He breaks his bonds and runs naked into the cemetery carrying with him the community's craziness.

Sometimes I think the whole human race is the Gerasene Demoniac. We collectively load up with demons; our heads full of conflicting and contending voices, planted there by "the Satan," that mechanism of using violence to control violence that only sets us up for more violence. Every so often the pressures build; we break the chains imposed by the law, and run wild through the cemetery. We call these breakouts war and give them each a name. This week we were told that we came within ten minutes of war with Iran. We all feel the tensions in the air as the demoniac rattles his chains and threatens to break loose again.

Jesus asks the demoniac his name and he answers "Legion" for we are many. Many voices contend in his head and no one can agree on anything. Each thinks they know the real motivation of the other and acts to block it. Nothing can get done and so the collective human with no orienting center is homeless, naked and lives among the tombs. Does this sound familiar?

In a strange twist, the demons tell Jesus they wish to enter a herd of pigs. Jesus grants them permission; they enter the pigs and the pigs stampede down the hill, and drown in the sea. What a surprising turn of events. Usually the mob circles the single victim and pushes them toward the edge where they leap or are shoved to their death with no one being responsible. But this time, under Jesus' direct supervision, the opposite happens. The mob of contending demons, represented by the unclean swine goes over the precipice to their death rather than the scapegoated one, the one usually sacrificed to the angry mob. It is a hint that Jesus will show us the way out of our lethal dilemma—something he does in the crucifixion and resurrection.

When the towns people came out they found the demoniac sitting at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind and they were afraid. They asked Jesus to leave and he did. Before he left, "the man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you! So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.'"

Elton John, after his cleansing in rehab, stayed in the music business, has remained sober for 28 years and is behind many charitable programs and redeeming relationships among his fellow musicians. He married a man he still loves and they have adopted two sons. He tours less than he used to because he wants to be home with his family. The movie he co-produced entitled "Rocket Man" is his way of proclaiming throughout the world how much his higher power has done for him. To God be the glory. Amen.