

Return to Your Home

Luke 8:26-39

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? I beg you, do not torment me” — for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. 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.

Today's Gospel admits of many interpretations. Jesus is traveling through some unfamiliar territory, an area dominated by Gentiles rather than Jews. He encountered a man possessed by demons, who apparently, according to Luke, ran around naked. When the man saw Jesus, he fell to his knees and shouted – or perhaps the demons shouted, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.”

Jesus asked, as he always did – Jesus wanted to know names – what the man's name was. He replied, “Legion,” because he was possessed by so many demons. Then Jesus famously ordered the demons into a herd of hogs, the very antithesis of kosher. The demon-possessed swine then hurled themselves off of a cliff and into the water, where they drowned. The keepers of the hogs were not pleased; they ran off and sounded an alarm throughout the area.

People came – out of curiosity, out of pique – it's hard to know. Some combination, perhaps. But Luke clearly suggests that not a few of the bystanders were upset. Here was the deranged man, the one who had been possessed by demons, sitting, fully clothed, at Jesus' feet. What were they to make of that? Luke says that they were afraid – so afraid, in fact, that Jesus left the area.

So what are we to derive from this story? The first thing that catches my eye is that the coming of Jesus brings change. Certainly this is true for the man whose demons had been forced to relocate. Suddenly this raving, naked lunatic had begun to behave. He's wearing clothes, and he sits at the feet of Jesus.

But change, for some, is unsettling. Consider the townspeople. They were afraid of the changes Jesus had wrought. He had altered their world, and it made them uncomfortable. The deranged man had been transformed. No longer was he the madman lurking on the margins; he was suddenly respectable, and they didn't like it. Much easier to dismiss him as a lunatic than be forced, suddenly, to take him seriously, to engage him in conversation, to invite him to dinner.

Change is unsettling. It disrupts our routine, and sometimes it forces us to deal differently with others. No wonder the people asked Jesus to leave. His presence had altered their world and their tidy assumptions.

The second element of this story I find striking is the conclusion. "The man from whom the demons had gone," Luke tells us, "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.'" The changed man wanted to leave town with Jesus. And who can blame him? Imagine having to face up to your past among people who know all about your past. Imagine the challenge of trying to convince those you know that you are a changed person.

Some of us can imagine that all too well.

Without indulging too deeply in self-disclosure, I grew up in an evangelical household and was profoundly shaped by my parents' faith. My late father, an evangelical preacher, was an admirable man, a man of sterling character and deep faith. And some day I may tell you about giving my heart to Jesus the first time on the prairie of southern Minnesota and the brown toaster cord trailing off of the kitchen table.

There is much about my evangelical upbringing that I cherish. At the same time, I'd like to think that my grasp of the faith over the past half century has not been static. I'd like to think that I've matured in the faith beyond "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam" and "Shine, Jesus, Shine."

So Jesus' injunction to the man now rid of demons is especially poignant to me: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

That's a difficult assignment – far more difficult, in my opinion, than following Jesus out of town. Instead, for whatever reason, Jesus wants the man to return home – return to those who know all about his past – and, as Luke records, “declare how much God has done for you.” Ugh. Far easier to leave the past behind – the nakedness, the lunacy – than face the people who know you best.

For me, that entails trying to keep the lines of communication open with the evangelicals of my past. That's not always easy. I'm sure I don't always say the right things or strike the right tone – or listen carefully enough. It would be much easier, frankly, to turn my back and leave all of that behind, to follow Jesus to some other mission field.

There are some who follow the call of Jesus across the oceans, to India or Sri Lanka or Haiti. Many, perhaps most, of these people are heroes of the faith, for they have discerned the call to preach the good news, often at considerable personal sacrifice. Like the disciples, they dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus.

But sometimes Jesus asks us to remain where we are, to “declare how much God has done” for us – right where we are, among those who know us.

And sometimes that's the biggest challenge of all.

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