

To Be A New Church, Part IV: Differences and Demons
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Luke 8:26-39

As a student in seminary, I spent nine months working part-time as a hospital chaplain. We received some basic training in how to work with patients and their families. Mostly we were coached in active listening and in practicing the ministry of presence. We ministered to families dealing with expected and unexpected illness, injury and death.

One night, though, I was at an absolute loss. The front desk called the chaplain's office at about 8 p.m. I had the overnight shift and was the only one there. The lady at the front desk said a man had walked into the hospital and asked to see a chaplain. We found a quiet place to sit down, and he came straight to the point: He believed he was possessed with a demon and he wanted an exorcism.

All of a sudden, my years as a church officer, my many classes in theology, church history, Christian education, Greek, Hebrew and even ethics were of no use at all. The man acted normally. He calmly said he did not believe he was a threat to himself or anyone. He was just tired of living with the demon.

I called a supervisor at home. We brainstormed. Finally, I called a local Catholic priest and arranged for the young man to meet with him to explore whether the Catholic church thought an exorcism was in order. The young man and I shared a word of prayer and he went on his way. I never heard how the story turned out.

As troubled as he was, that young man had it better than the man in the story from Luke we heard a moment ago, if such a comparison can be made. Demonology – the belief that evil spirits existed and sometimes invaded people – was widespread in the ancient world.

Humanity has always sought an explanation for evil or dysfunction that it cannot trace to a specific source or cause. Today, science explains much of what mystified the authors of scripture – mental and physical illnesses. But in the years when scripture was written, people used various words for these evil spirits – words that vary even further through alternative translations of the ancient text. Over time, the root of evil came to be known as one individual entity, the “accuser,” “the slanderer,” the devil, Satan. But that was later.

As we heard in today's text, the man that Jesus encountered after crossing over from Galilee was literally filled with demons. Not just one. When Jesus asked the unclean spirit its name, it called itself Legion, which might be read to say as many as 5,000, because that is how many soldiers made up a Roman military legion.

At this point, whatever individual personality, distinct story or unique spark the man had was completely subsumed by this legion of demons. No longer was there any sign of who he had ever been.

Jesus knew what to do, according to Luke's account. Stories of Christ exorcising demons appear in multiple gospels. In this one, Jesus takes care to ask the demon its name because it was thought that was the key to getting the upper hand, to defusing its power. But the text also gives us clues that Jesus always had the upper hand. Jesus commands the spirits to come out of the man and then he gives them permission to enter a herd of pigs, which immediately run off a hillside to be drowned in the sea.

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This story can seem so remote from our modern day lives, this business of demons and pigs and the subtext of the clash of ancient cultures and customs. It probably seems even more disconnected from the subject of the series of sermons and dialogues we've been having this month.

As many of you know, we've been thinking deeply and prayerfully and asking hard questions about the future of the church at large, especially the protestant church in America. At the heart of these sermons and discussions has been one key issue - how we, that is, people in general, deal with our differences. As important is the question of whether we will ever understand and value our differences enough to become a thriving multicultural and multigenerational church.

For the older generations, some voices in our denomination say there is unfinished business relating to race. They say we can never become truly multicultural – meaning pluralistic, not dominated by one race or culture – until we deal openly with how race has led to advantages for some and disadvantages for others, depending on color.

Many younger people bring a different perspective. These generations are in many ways post-racial. They see difference as an opportunity. They already live globally and pluralistically and they don't have much faith that the institutions their parents built – including the church – can work things out. Many in these generations are staying away from church, based on their perception that the Church at large is hypocritical, divisive,

and judgmental, perceptions drawn from some of our nation's most visible religious leaders.

A couple of weeks ago, our Intern Danny Trapp, our co-choir directors Smitty Flynn and Thomas Moore and I were talking about the story we heard today about the demoniac. Is there a word from God in today's story for the church? Can it help the Church deal with its challenges and questions, so many of which relate to how we handle our differences, differences across race, gender and generation, differences across religious and political outlooks, differences across sexual orientation and more?

I think it was Thomas who said it first – but the four of us came to focus on how people make demons out of our differences. Perhaps it is out of fear, conscious or subconscious. Perhaps it is rooted in ignorance, even among highly educated people. Perhaps it is just intentional prejudice and hatred. But we do make demons out of our differences. And there are demons without and within us.

We start by identifying the demon in the other person, the demon outside of us. We make demons out of our differences as a way to demean or dehumanize someone we disagree with or dislike. We make demons out of our differences so that we can label, simplify and more easily dismiss another point of view.

At our very worst, we group and categorize people and rob them of their individual value. All blacks do or don't or won't do this. All whites can or cannot do that. Everyone *knows* that this truth applies to all Latinos and that to all Asian-Americans. Right? Southerners see the world this way and northerners see it another. Same for all liberals and conservatives. If you know of any one of these "types" people, you know them all, the logic goes. No need to get to know any others.

Other times, we are far more subtle, even if we are just as devious. One of the most hurtful ways some people do this concerns gays and lesbians. Especially in the church. How many gay people in America have been subject to the church's effort to "heal" them of their "dysfunction?" Or, after reaching out to gays and lesbians, some churches draw them into "restorative" or "repairative" or "reorientation therapy," which is meant somehow to rewire a gay person's very DNA, the way that God made them.

A gay friend recently told me how a straight person he knows is always telling him that as a gay man, he "should just live this way" or he "should" just change that part of himself. His friendly response to this person is to say, "Thank you for your thoughts, but please don't 'should' all over me."

I congratulated him on his grace and confessed that I was not nearly as graceful when I recently debated an evangelical seminarian. He contended that being gay is pretty much the same as being a child abuser or someone who practices bestiality. It's all the same, the seminarian insisted - all just variations of psychological dysfunction.

And before we know it, the demon without has created the demon within. People make demons out of differences to make themselves feel better about their own point of view or opinion or heritage or culture or sexual identity. But, while they are examining or judging the other person, a different demon takes up residence. A demon known by many names – racism, sexism, ageism, regionalism, classism, homophobia, whatever it takes to affirm one way of being by putting limits on others.

“Well, he’s white and from the country, so he can’t know what it’s like to have grown up black and poor in the city.”

“She’s straight and I’m gay – we will never really understand each other.”

“She has had a stroke and has a brain injury – I’m not comfortable interacting.”

“He’s 25 and the guy he’s talking to is 55. They will never connect.”

“She likes hymns from the blue Hymnal and I want only gospel music. We’ve got nothing in common.”

“That guy might as well be an atheist, he distrusts the church so much. I can’t live without the church. So, we would have nothing to talk about.”

Chains and shackles.

That is what they did with demons in ancient days. As we heard in scripture, once a person was thought to have a demon, they were bound in chains and banished to live in the tombs, out of sight and out of mind.

We do the same with people who we think have demons, don’t we? Put chains and shackles on them. Label them, devalue them, control them, restrict them, banish them from the mainstream, if that’s what it takes – all to protect the “rest,” even if the rest have their own demons, the kind that are less visible.

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Jesus felt called to see the other side. He crossed over the Sea of Galilee, a risky journey in and of itself. But Jesus calmed the storm that arose and they landed safely – if uneasily - on the opposite, unfamiliar shore.

We never get the name of the man who was filled with evil spirits. The demons had taken over so completely that his God-given individual identity had been buried, if not erased. But the demons in the man knew there was trouble the second they saw Jesus. Here was the one they could not control or defeat, the one who could cast them off the face of the earth, never to possess anyone again. “The demons begged Jesus not to order them to go back into the abyss.” (Luke 8:31)

Jesus calls the demons out by name – Legion - and orders them to their death by drowning them in a herd of unclean pigs.

The demons we face in America – in and out of the Church, inside and outside of our own souls – have been around for a while. They are good at concealing themselves and they are not easily exorcised. But we see in today’s story that the first step in defeating them is to name them: Bigotry, racism, sexism, ageism, regionalism, classism, homophobia.

What if we were to do more – what if we were to rob them of their power in other ways? We can do that. We can, starting today, call them out and sap them of their strength by deepening relationships among us. Not just a quick greeting on Sunday mornings or a brief catch-up at meetings or chit-chat at fellowship events. But by telling each other our stories and closing gaps that inevitably creep in between us.

Today, you’re invited to do that ... to begin to take power away from the demons that exist in society. On Thursday, those of you who are on Caldwell’s email group received word of a new initiative called Caldwell In Common. It starts right away with what we’re calling the Four by Four Dialogues. These will be diverse groupings of four people who will meet to hear and share and listen deeply as each member has a turn in sharing his or her story. You’ll hear more about this in a few minutes. Along the way, with God in the Holy Spirit present, we can exorcize our differences so they lose their power over us and, instead, allow us to glimpse God and the kingdom of heaven in new ways, to become, with God’s guidance, a more deeply multicultural, multigenerational part of the body of Christ.

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This is no small thing we undertake, mind you. Our story from Luke reminds us how entrenched the forces of fear are in the human psyche.

After Jesus healed the man of his demons, word spread quickly across the countryside. And what did the people do? Did they rejoice for the man? Did they confess their own demons, large or small? Did they gather around Jesus to be touched and healed in word and deed? No. As Luke writes in chapter 8, verse 37:

“All the people of the surrounding country asked Jesus to leave them, for they were seized with great fear.” (8:37)

They preferred, it seems, the demons they knew over the messiah they didn't.

So, Jesus and the disciples turn to get back in the boat to go back to Galilee. The man healed of his demons begs to go with Christ. But, instead, Jesus commissions him:

“Go back home and tell everyone what God has done for you.”

Friends, as we begin a new part of our journey together, we hear the same commission:

Go out into the world, gather in small groups of church members. Tell openly and candidly and listen deeply.

But go also to your homes, places of work and play. Tell what God has done for you – the very same God who claims and calls each of us by name, who makes us not just different but unique, the same God who, in Jesus Christ, has power and authority to cast demons into the abyss.

Go and tell everyone what *this* God has done for you.

Amen.