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Luke

DEVILED HAM

If I was a homiletics professor, that is, someone who taught preaching, I might just assign this passage for my students to preach on Father's Day. To prove that the distance between the cultural observances of our time, like Mother's Day and Father's Day, and the gospel not only bear little resemblance to one another, but that sometimes the disconnect is a cruel joke – the healing of the Gerasene Demoniac on Father's Day? You've got to be kidding?

We are supposed to be celebrating positive male role models this morning, buying dads lots of neckties, taking dad to lunch, or to the golf course, or just smiling at them as they plop down in their Lazy Boy to enjoy an afternoon of pampering. The kids will say, prompted by mom, "Now don't you even think about cutting the grass today pops — it's Father's Day." You can cut it tomorrow.

How nice. How Ozzie and Harriet. How important to the economy. But if you happen to be a dad who is also a preacher who follows the New Common Lectionary, a set of prescribed texts that Chris and I often follow as a sermon discipline, what on earth are you supposed to do with this text? This is not a positive role model — a man afflicted with so many demons that his name is "Legion," a man who is certifiably insane, abandoned by his family and the society in which he lived as unredeemable, an untouchable, a frightening, unmanageable mistake of nature—naked, foaming at the mouth, living in a graveyard chained up like a wild dog—he would occasionally break free and go on a rampage in the desert—where he is the last person you would ever want to meet on a camping trip.

Now I don't know, maybe that description makes somebody in here think of their father, but I doubt it. Not that fathers don't have their demons, mind you, but most carry them in a more respectable way, hidden behind suits, and tinted windows, and the various guises of respectability. What's more, such texts clearly reveal the ancient cosmology of the Bible, where

mental illness was thought to be caused by demon possession, and the demons even talk back to Jesus, begging to be put in a herd of pigs grazing nearby.

Most people don't know this if they haven't been to seminary, but in those days you couldn't just cast out demons and let them run loose in the world to do mischief by taking up residence in other bodies. Any self-respecting exorcist knows that after you get a demon out of somebody you can't just let them fly away to do mischief by invading some other body — what about the children? You have to put them someplace, store them in another body to protect the innocent.

If you are a Jew, and think pigs are the lowest life form and a major source of impurity, they make the perfect receptacle for excess demons. Think of it as demon recycling, or hazardous waste disposal in the ancient world. They've got to go somewhere, and in that day the whole world was thought to be a battleground between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, and any good messiah would have power over demons.

But what a strange text — on Father's Day no less. It is the only account in the Bible in which Jesus talks to demons, actually negotiates with them and get this, gives them “permission” to enter the pigs. Why can't they do that on their own? Was this Luke's way of showing that Jesus had power over the forces of evil in the world; that yes even the demons feared him?

But it's gets even stranger. There are so many demons (the word “legion” describes a Roman army unit comprised of 6,000 troops), that the whole herd of swine is now as crazy as the man used to be. They are now possessed little porkers, and bless their hearts they can't take it — they go stampeding down the hillside and hurl themselves into a lake and commit mass suicide.

I always wondered about the owner of the pigs, since there is nothing to indicate that he was compensated in any way for his loss. He's a pig farmer for Pete's sake and now his whole herd is dead. The Gerasene Demoniac may be feeling much better, but what do you do with all these dead pigs — turn them into deviled ham?

Meanwhile, the man who is healed is so grateful to Jesus that he begs to become one of his disciples, but Jesus says no, telling him to return home and tell people what God has done for him. Isn't that strange, that Jesus does not accept someone as a disciple after healing him? I thought he accepted everyone? Why can't the Gerasene Demoniac come along? Why does he get healed and then sent home? Did Jesus look at him and decide that even he has certain standards for his apostles and this guy is just too risky, too unstable, too likely to lapse back into his crazy ways?

For years I thought this text was just another story about how the forces of evil feared Jesus, and the pigs were a convenient way to contain the demon spill, and that Luke was telling

us that in the cosmic battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, Jesus wins. But that's because I never paid much attention to a single word in the text. The word "Legion."

I mentioned that it meant a large contingent of Roman soldiers, but notice that this is the name given for the demonic. Names were not just designators or labels, they revealed the soul of that which they named. Luke is talking in code here, just as the writer of Revelation talks in code about the Roman Empire, which possessed Israel itself.

Here is a clue. If the Jews regard pigs as the lowest life form, and wouldn't eat them, then why are there so many pigs in the story? Because pigs had one purpose, and one purpose only — to feed the bands of Roman recruits. The demons are Rome, and they beg Jesus to be put into the pigs that sustain Roman soldiers. The legions who occupied Israel, who kept it under control through fear and intimidation and a system of servitude through taxation and corruption cannot be challenged because nobody dares to argue with the point of a Roman sword, much less a "legion" of them.

Countless preachers have gone on about what must have crippled the Gerasene Demoniac, what fears possessed him, what childhood experiences crippled him, and why Jesus is the long-awaited answer to his mental illness — without realizing that this story is profoundly political. It is not a story in the end about demon possession (after all, nobody in those days would have argued the point), but about the internal exile of the children of Israel — possessed by Rome.

This story occurs in a section of Luke's gospel in which Jesus is healing the untouchables. He has arrived at a "far country" (across the lake meaning where the Gentiles lived), "stepped out on land" and meets those who are in exile in their own land, who are unclean by virtue of being occupied and oppressed. Every day they must make an impossible choice: confront Rome, only to have their shackles fastened more tightly, or be "driven into the wilds" where they lose their identity.

When Jesus asks the demonic to give his name, he might just as well have said, "My name is Rome." This is not a story about Jesus as a healer so much as it is a story about Jesus as a liberator. Everyone is always talking about how nice it is that the man is healed, but the people are terrified. This means that they are to stand up to Rome and they know what that means — and they'd rather raise pigs thank you very much.

Just before he arrives in this god-forsaken place called Garasa, he has calmed a storm, thereby allaying fears that the land of the gentiles is a land of deathly abominations. When he returns from Garasa, he heals two women whose place in the unity of Israel is blocked by the impurity of blood and death — but in the end it is always about fear. Fear is what possesses us, fear is the demon that robs us of life. Fear is the enemy of the moral life.

People who are possessed by fear do terrible things. If you ask someone today what caused 9/11, they would say terrorism of course, but they would not say the occupation of Saudi Arabia by the American Empire. If you ask people why we are in Afghanistan, they would say, "to

protect our way of life and fight terrorism.” But they would not say because, like every other Empire, we still believe in the myth of redemptive violence. It still possesses us and drives us mad.

Stay out of politics, preacher. Sorry, not possible. The New Testament is such a profoundly political manifesto, so dangerously anti-imperial, that the only way to do it justice is to do justice in our time. Because as Harvey Cox put it, we don't just live in the Empire, the Empire lives in us.

If demon possession stands for occupation in this story then just consider how the Empire still rules. Occupation can be obvious, just ask the Palestinians in Gaza what it means to be occupied by the very people whose life was shaped by the horror of occupation. I truly believe that if Jesus were to return in our time and act like Jesus, he would come among us as a Palestinian whose ministry took place mostly on the Israeli side of a checkpoint. Or he would be an Afghan woman, explaining to American troops that peace will come through schools, not through bombs.

Or he would be a talking pelican coated with oil, barely able to fly. See, the only thing greater than the tragedy in the gulf is the tragedy of not reading the signs. After the flood in Genesis, God says, “Let this be a sign to you.” Well, of course we prefer rainbows to underwater videos of gushing oil, but they are both signs. What would it mean to have this addiction exorcised? Aren't we all possessed by our addiction to carbon, and isn't it killing us? Like junkies we tap vein after vein but now we can't stop the bleeding. “Let this be a sign to you.”

Total spending on gifts for dad today will exceed 9.8 billion dollars, or enough to assure a primary education for every child on the planet who is not getting one now. We don't just live in the Empire, the Empire lives in us. And on the altar of our fears, especially the fear that we can never have enough, all Empires fall. Our is falling.

You may find this disturbing, just a few weeks before the 4th of July, but my allegiance as a preacher is to Jesus, not to the principalities and powers. Several weeks ago I accepted the high honor of delivering the commencement sermon to the graduating class at my alma mater, Phillips Theological Seminary. I preached from the parable of the leaven, the corrupting force that the woman hid in three measures of meal until the whole loaf was corrupted.

Then I told the graduates that what they must never forget if they are to survive parish ministry is that they do not work for the Empire. In fact, ministry is unique in this respect, because in one way or another, almost everyone else works for the Empire. What then does it mean if people step into a “sanctuary” looking for a different word, looking to be freed of their demons, and all they hear is a preacher who has sold out to the Empire? Who preaches the prosperity gospel, or teaches people how to hate the people on the other side, or how to circle the wagons and get ready for the rapture?

We have for so long focused on the sickness of the individual in western culture that we have forgotten that we have all internalized the diseases of our time. We are possessed by the Empire's gospel, which is this: *be afraid, be very afraid*, instead of being liberated by the words of the one whom even the demons fear: the one who said, *fear not*.

After 9/11, when a commission was established to compensate victims of that horrible day, a friend of mine was attending a hearing in Washington to set guidelines for payments. An expert on the value of human life turned to him and said, "Can you believe that there are some people in this world who think that a janitor's life is equal in value to the life of a CEO?"

And that is when my friend said that he knew he was in the wrong profession. He was a lobbyist, and now he is a minister – because, he said, I wanted to be crazy like that.

To all the fathers in the room, and those who know how much unfinished business in the world is unfinished business between fathers and sons and fathers and daughters, and husbands and wives and partners — this may not have been such a strange text for Father's Day after all. In various ways we may all be living among the tombs, and we may even resent the idea that someone has the power to call out the demons that haunt us and keep us in chains.

Some of you are possessed by the demons of alcohol, whether you have admitted to it or not. Others are possessed of the demons that drive you to cheat on your spouse, to prove that you aren't dead yet, and that if you seduce enough women you will never die. Some of you are possessed of the fear that without enough signs of wealth, the world will write you off as a failure. Others think that if you have never fathered a child you can't be a father to others — not true.

Jesus is asking that we name the demons, including the demon that is the Empire we live in and the Empire that lives in us. Can you do it, I asked the graduates at Phillips that day? Because if you can, you will elicit both great power and great resistance (the two always go together). If you can do it, you will preside in sanctuaries that allow people to step out of the madness of the world from time to time, and name the demons that keep them in prison.

All you need is a table with bread and wine, a prayer for healing, and the gospel of liberation. The result will be that some will beg to follow you and others will beg you to leave. That's when you will know that you have gotten it right. Name the demons, and then cast them out. Oh, and don't forget to dispose of them properly, out of consideration for others.

Amen.



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