

“Unlocking the Shackles of Fear”

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Luke 8:26-39 (NRSV)

²⁶Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As 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. ²⁸When 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” — ²⁹for 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.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³²Now 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. ³³Then 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. ³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵Then 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. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then 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. ³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹“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.

SERMON: “Unlocking the Shackles of Fear”

Preparing for today has been very challenging and difficult for me. When I learned that this Gospel text was today’s scripture writing I was baffled by its meaning for us today yet feeling it had an important message. I tried to understand the naked man with demons, shackled and chained, as those shackled and chained by the systems and structures, prejudices, and discrimination practices in this country. And I also tried to understand the naked man with demons, shackled and chained, as American society in general – that we, the people, in our fears and hate and derision are shackled and chained and filled with demons. But then I could not take it any further..... That is when I realized I needed to understand the text on a personal level as well: “A man,” a singular person, informed me that I needed to read this text as me the one with demons. My demons being my current emotions in response to the tone and inaction in the last months of the leaders and wannabe leaders in our political system have stymied my thought process, my ability, and what I believe responsibility, to offer words of support or hope. I wondered why that is so and this is what I learned about myself, my current demons.

I am angry – I am angry with our political system, I am angry with our criminal justice system, I am angry with our educational system, I am angry with our healthcare system, I am angry with our media. And I am very angry, disgusted and disappointed with many of the people in these systems and places that manipulate, lie, self-serve, and spew division, incite fear, and create violence against one another.

I am grieving. I am grieving the loss of life, the wounding and destruction of life, and especially the lack of respect for life in the gay bar, The Pulse, in Orlando, Florida. But there are more: An AME church in South

Carolina, Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Ct, Virginia Tech College, a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado, a federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado. When will it end? If we respected human life, *all* human life we, the people, would end this homegrown terror.

I am incredibly frustrated. A frustration that helps me identify with this man shackled and chained by those who used their power to separate him from society, not offering any respect or dignity. My deep connection with and care for my fellow human being, for all of God's children is being ignored, dismissed and invalidated. My love has been shackled and chained by the aforementioned systems and the people and entities using unchecked power.

This is not just about me however. I know I am not alone. I know there are others in this sacred space this morning, in this community, state, nation and world who feel just as angry, sad, and frustrated as I. And there are so many more who live with an added sense of vulnerability and fear as victims of such dismissal of the value for human life, for their lives.

I believe the greatest threat is fear. Fear is making us all victims. On all sides of all the debates so much of the tenor of the conversation, so much of hateful and hurtful words and actions are rooted in fear. So much of the silence refuting and refusing to allow such negativity to exist is rooted in fear: A fear of people who look different, who act different from one's self or one's expectations. A fear of losing one's sense of security currently experienced in privilege, financial security, and power over others. It is the shackles of fear that must be unlocked.

People who care deeply about people, about their community, their country have shared with me "I give up" because of the negativity, negative energy, support for laws that hurt rather than heal, for attitudes and action that divide and kill are seemingly too strong to fight. The demons of sexism, racism, classism, misogyny, xenophobia, bigotry, extremism, hatred seem to be our collective Legion – recognizing that "Legion" in this text represents a Roman legion or army of 5000-6000 and a state sanctioned entity to protect self above all else.

"I give up" translates to "I have no hope."

Both fear and hopelessness chain us, shackle us which can only lead to our own destruction, to us living in the tombs.

Yet, I now understand today's story is not to be focused on all that is wrong. It is a story of new life and of hope. New life when we allow the miracles, wonders and healing God offers when we let God into our lives. Hope for people who believe in the life, teachings, healings and miracles of Jesus. Hope found in belief in life after death. Hope rooted in trust in others to carry on the mission and ministry of Jesus; the mission and ministry of love.

After the demons left the man, the man sat at the feet of Jesus, clothed and "in his right mind." This man - through faith in Jesus - was able to be rid of the demons and engage and live in society. This man, one day chained and shackled because of his demons and the fear of others, is freed of all of that through faith. Our faith is a gift, what tremendous power faith offers to free us from the pain of despair and grief; fear and hopelessness; anger and frustration.

Yet, there is another dimension in today's text. Verse 35 – "Then people came out to see what happened..... and they were afraid." They were afraid that this man they had shackled and chained out of fear are now afraid in his wellness; that Jesus has made him well. When they heard how Jesus healed this one man, "then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear." It was much safer for the people to have the power to control, coerce, and chain this man they did not understand. That someone, that Jesus, could reveal the human dignity and value of this person – this child of God – frightened them. To see love at work was too scary.

I am reminded of a line from an Elton John song *American triangle* "Two coyotes running down a deer, hate what we don't understand."

We live in an increasingly secular world. Many people do not understand what it is we believe, and why we can have hope, why we offer hope in times of hopelessness, times when people are afraid, and why we love. Some of us do not understand it, and some, too often forget the power of hope and the power of love. Obviously, myself included. And I am angry, grieving, and frustrated that I allowed myself to be sucked into all the negativity, to think for a second that the demons of society will win; to lack the faith necessary to believe and to know that love can and will win... all the time and in all times.

The promise of hope can be found in faith in God. It is found in the stories of the Bible as exiles wandered in the desert, as Noah built an ark, as the prophets proclaimed truth and hope in the diaspora when people did not know where to find God and lost community, as Jesus offers in his life, death and resurrection. Hope is found in today's story in the man who once was naked, shackled and chained because of fear, living in tombs – now clothed and well and wants to go with Jesus.

Yet Jesus sends him away and say "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." In response to Jesus' commission this man "he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him." What hope that offers to and for all of us! All can be made well, and faith can give us the courage and strength to insist that love matters, and peace is possible.

I commission you as Jesus commissions all of us to: Spread the hope. Keep loving. Share your faith. A faith that calls us to speak the truth to power, to care for the widow, to free the oppressed and the prisoner. We have a responsibility to honor life for all and to do all we can to destroy the demons of bigotry, hate, prejudice, injustice, unleashed power by individuals and entities. It is difficult work, frustrating work, sometimes scary work, but so very necessary in today's world, and so very hopeful.

Let us, together, believe in hope, reflect hope. For hope is only possible when people believe in it, proclaim it, insist upon it. Let us, together, live in love, reflect love. For love is what frees us all.