

June 23, '19, Anthon UMC, Luke 8.26-39, "What Is Your Name?"

By Pastor Sheryl K Ashley

You may or may not have noticed I preach lectionary pretty faithfully even when the scripture is hard to understand or even harder to explain. A difficult assigned Scripture is a challenge I can't resist. So here on this lovely day of a baptism in our midst of a precious child, Walter, I find I am given the story of Jesus casting some demons out of a man who was under bondage to evil beings. How do we tie these two events together? Perhaps the answer is subtly hidden somewhere in the story, so let's check it out. Being almost ready to retire I can tell you that God can speak through anything, anywhere, anyone.

In the story it wasn't this man's fault the demons attacked him, anymore than some mentally ill people are plagued with their attacks of horror, so let's not fear or blame the man for his insanity. It's all on the illness or the demons, whichever you prefer to call it. In our story these evil beings begged to be given permission to enter into a herd of pigs. Permission was given, and the pigs, being smarter than we give them credit for, refused to be used in this manner. If you've ever worked with swine you can easily believe these pigs committed suicide by jumping into a lake, rather than be controlled by an outside force. Pigs are not cooperative! You can chase them. You can beat them. They will not be controlled. So, this herd dashed

themselves into the lake and drown rather than be controlled. What a gruesome sight. Their owners though didn't take the loss well, so they went on a crazed rampage of fear themselves.

Jesus began freeing this plagued man by merely demanding the demon's name. I want you to remember that when you give someone your name, you give them power over you. When a child is baptized one question that is asked the parents is, "What name is given to this child?" This child's name is given before God to let God and others know this child named, whatever the name, now belongs to God. In some places in the world people's lives are endangered because they got baptized. It marks them forever as named Christian (little Christs). The name that is above all other names is not taken well by those to whom the name of Christ means they might lose control of people to do their evil bidding. Some people carry so much evil in their demand for power they steal other people's freedom to achieve it. ISIS is known for doing this evil today especially to Christians, wiping out entire villages of believers.

They say sweetest sound in the world is someone saying your name. Well most of the time. When a parent or other authority scolds you, they often pronounce your whole name first middle and last and it's not a pleasant sound for you know they have the power over good or evil for you.

I was reading on Facebook the other day about a woman in the area shopping in some Target store. She warned of two strange women who came after her while she was shopping because she, with her two small children, was easily distracted. These two women kept following her, asking her and the children personal questions, their ages and their names, and the mother refused to give them this information and instructed her oldest child not to give it either. The women kept trying to corner the mother so the mother wisely turned her shopping cart around placing it between them and her children and got away, as she suspected if they knew the children's names, they would more easily take them for human trafficking, especially the 7-year-old who would be prime age to sell. The names would give the traffickers power over the children when they took away their freedom, as the mother suspected was their plan. Money is everything to many an evil force.

When Jesus demanded the name of the evil power that was causing the man to behave like a crazy person, they had no resort but to tell him their name. Their name was Legion, which in military terms in Jesus' time consisted of 6000 men. What a crowd of evil souls fighting for room in a man who was judged mad for running around in a graveyard naked and raving like a maniac. He was the well-known town crazy man. They all

knew him. They all they avoided him like the plague he was deemed to be. His strength was overpowering. It must have taken the whole town and more to catch him, trap him, long enough to bind him in chains and shackles, but he would break them and run into the wilderness shrieking like a Halloween that couldn't end.

It hard to keep something that refuses to be put under anyone's control, something wild that just wants to be free. Such an animal will gnaw off its own paw to get free. I tied up our new dog the other day, putting her leash under a heavy wooden chair leg on our patio. She howled for a while and then there was quiet. I went to look out the window and she was gone! She is a big puppy and I had hoped she had gone to sleep. Rather she had dragged the heavy wooden chair across the patio and down some stairs where the leg of the chair had risen off the ground freeing her leash and she had escaped. There was no end to what she would have done to be free and she had outsmarted me.

This man wanted desperately to be free and his howling was the first greeting Jesus and his men met with, as they stepped out of the boat at this country of the Gerasene's. I believe he was howling to be set free as he fell at Jesus' feet, but the demons inside of him knew who Jesus was too, and they shouted at Jesus, addressing him correctly as "Son of the

Most High God”, and begged him, not to torment them. But Jesus demanded the unclean spirits to come out of him. They being many begged him not to send them back to the abyss, which was a bottomless pit, a place of punishment and hell. Once Jesus had his name, he took power over this evil legion to send them out of the man and into the abyss, such an evil place even they were horrified so that’s when they begged Jesus to let them go into a herd of swine. It seems a demon needs some kind of flesh to inhabit to exert control but they lost all their power that day

Calling on the name of Jesus in the time of trouble saves and frees us in ways that empowers us, and so this man was set free.

Now on this day of baptism, which washes away our sin and frees us to live in His Spirit, I hesitate to make a comparison of baptism with a man possessed, but this helpless man was washed clean of the evil which wanted to possess him when he ran up to Jesus’ boat. So, we in baptism are plunged into the waters at the font we symbolically enter into Jesus’ death and are raised with His resurrection to new life through the Holy Spirit, emerging a new creature in Jesus Christ. Baptism is so much more than a rite of passage. It is a power given to live the Christian life.

Jesus made this former possessed man free and whole again. Can you only imagine how free this former captive of evil must have felt having

these entities of satan washed away in the waters of the lake, defeated and gone from him. Ah to be once lost and now restored, clothed and in his right mind. Everyone was talking about it and especially the swine herders who were furious and full of fear at their loss of pigs. However, the question is, why were Jews raising animals that were called unclean and forbidden to them? How many times do we do things for monetary gain that would not be good for us or others...like those promoting gambling or selling drugs, human trafficking, or cheating or scamming or stealing? Who wouldn't be furious to have that profit taken from them? Drug dealers crossing our borders daily would have such a person ruining their smuggling ring, killed in a flash.

So, Jesus was asked to leave their country. The people would rather have lived with a madman than to have him made sane at their expense. Sanity or money? let me see, since it's the other person who is insane or addicted, many will choose money, the love of which is the root of all evil.

The newly restored man wanted to go with Jesus. I would have wanted to leave too. But Jesus told him to stay and declare to those around him the God who saved him. So, the now sane and calm man went his way lifting up the name of Jesus and telling how Jesus had freed him from evil. The

best witness of all you and the people about you that have changed since Jesus came into their lives, especially those bold enough to share it.

Whatever you believe about demon possession, and when I look at the unexplained evil such as the epidemic of shootings in our own country, I believe it can happen. We all are possessed in some degree with some addiction or sickness of mind, body and soul that keeps us from being all God calls us to be. We all need that freedom God offers in Jesus Christ. "What is your name?" he is asking us. Is the power of your name called in baptism holding firm in the word and in prayer and in action? Are we as parents, after the baptism of our children, training, teaching them to call upon the name of Jesus and to put them under Jesus protection time after time, reminding them of their baptism?

This strange and scary story is merely a story of God's love and how he desires to free us from whatever holds us back from fulfilling the promise of our baptism. Let us rejoice in our own vows and the water and word and the Holy Spirit who claims us and frees us all to be named God's children. Amen.