

Legion

Last week I had made the concerted effort to be more organized—to start preparing for this service earlier than usual as I worked through the process of selecting all the music and programming our digital musician. I had planned a sermon entitled “Enough is Enough” based on the passage from 1 Kings 19 which now forms the basis of the preparation meditation. Then the events of last Sunday in Orlando happened and that was no longer the message which I felt called to speak. That tragedy has dominated radio and TV, print and internet. In all the things said, I found Legion, the name the demon possessed man gave as his identify. So instead of Elijah’s story, we are going to look into the story of the Gerasene Demented which seems to speak into the brokenness which led to this latest tragedy as well as others, like the one in Charleston a year ago. Some background on where we are in Luke’s narrative about Jesus’ ministry as this passage begins. Jesus has gained a reputation locally for his teachings and the things he has done. Now Jesus has gotten into a boat with his disciples and directed them to go to the other side. This trip turns dangerous while Jesus is sleeping when a storm arises. The frightened disciples wake Jesus. Jesus calms the storm and rebukes them for their lack of faith. As those other unnamed guests who dined at the Pharisee’s table asked this question, “Who is this who can forgive sins?” ; the disciples now ask “Who is this that commands the winds?” As readers of the narrative, we know the answer. But those present with Jesus, don’t seem to be getting it. Today’s passage begins when that boat ride ends and Jesus goes ashore. Jesus and the disciples have arrived at the country of the Gerasenes—which Luke again specifically tells us is opposite Galilee. And this being opposite isn’t just a matter of being physically on the other side of the body of water. Jesus had done that border crossing thing he does so often again. He is now in the country of the Gerasenes—an area belonging to Gentiles. The absence of Judaic customs becomes obvious with the introduction of a herd of pigs. Jesus who is being called Rabbi has done what no self-respecting rabbi would do—he has left the Jewish homeland, taking his disciples and entered a land inhabited by the unclean which can make him ritually unclean. Jesus doesn’t hardly get out of the boat before he’s confronted by a man who is possessed by an unclean spirit. Actually, the man is more than possessed, he’s occupied. Because that was what a legion was and did. A Legion was a unit by which the Roman military organized itself in order to occupy territory. This guy isn’t possessed by just one unclean spirit, but rather he is occupied by a host of them. The Roman term legion represented 6,000 soldiers so Luke’s use of the term is to make sure we understand how serious this possession was. This man had been rejected by his community who had bound him with chains as he was considered dangerous. But he had broken those chains and now lived alone wandering among the tombs. He lives alone in a place of utter desolation and uncleanness and is clearly a frightening hazard to himself and to others. This intensifies the nature and number of boundaries that Jesus crosses when speaking with the man. There are several points which could be made here—and have been—about this encounter. The man doesn’t come to Jesus pleading for healing. Although it is the man who falls down before Jesus, it is the demons who speak. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” You see what we often miss in this story is that Jesus has already spoken to the unclean spirits residing within the man. He has told them to come out of the man. We often marvel at the fact that the demons knew who Jesus was while the disciples had still not understood this. Jesus then

continues to speak with the demons, asking their name which is given as Legion. Jesus grants their petition to enter the herd of pigs which are then maddened so that they rush into the water and drown. All of this is witnessed by the swineherd's keepers who rush back into town to tell the community what has happened. This report draws a crowd. What is interesting here is that when the people arrive and find the man clothed and sitting at Jesus' feet in his right mind, they are afraid. The crowd that has gathered, having heard the stories about the amazing things taking place among the tombs and at the lakeshore—this crowd does not rejoice over the healing. They ask Jesus to leave, so Jesus gets back into the boat and returns to the other—the Jewish—side of the Galilee. All of this means that Jesus, the Jewish itinerant rabbi proclaiming the coming kingdom of God, goes to an unclean land to meet a man possessed by unclean spirits living in an unclean place. According to all expectations, that is the very last place Jesus should be. Which, when you think about it is where God usually shows up. At our moments of profound doubt, grief, loss and defeat. And—this is the one that often surprises us most—among those who may to this point have little interest in, let alone relationship with, God. This suggests that there is absolutely nowhere God is not willing to go to reach and free and sustain and heal those who are broken and despairing. This is true in Orlando, Charleston and many other places. More importantly, it also tells us that there is no person that is God-forsaken: Unclean, Outcast, Abandoned, Unpopular, Incarcerated, Unbeliever. No one is left out of God's love. We are not told that this Gentile man became Jewish, or maybe later, Christian. He declares he wants to follow Jesus, but is told to instead go back to his community and proclaim what God has done in his life. And he goes away proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus has done for him. It is astonishing to realize that this whole trip of Jesus seems to have been to do this one thing: to transform this one man possessed by demons into the human being who was also a beloved child of God. To show him how much God loved him. To give him back his identity so that it was no longer Legion. After this past week, I think we also need to consider those demons who possessed the man. It seems to me that there are demons loose in our world as well. Perhaps not in the form depicted in art or in this Biblical story. But demons nevertheless. There are persons possessed and powerless before addictions and mental illnesses. There are also those possessed by the demons of hatred and fear, of distrust and prejudice, of violence and retribution, of seeking to blame innocents for the victimization of other innocents. When I listened to what was being said this week about those in Pulse and those who share the faith identity of the shooter, I hear the voices of demons. I hear the voice of the crowd who asks Jesus to leave. The crowd whose members do not want the power which comes through the love and compassion which Jesus demonstrated to them. The events in Orlando bring us face to face with the power of evil, the power that destroys and devastates human lives. That power exists all around us. But hearing the irrational and angry reaction of many we need to consider our choices in this. We can have a role in what the future brings. By rejecting the demonic anger of revenge and blame, our response to the horror which happened can be holy anger—anger focused on affirming life, rejecting horror and death, refusing to succumb to fear and hate. Our holy response will recognize the need for justice in a world that continues to have so much evil. It will allow us to dedicate our lives and efforts to building a world where hate cannot thrive, where prejudice cannot cloud our vision of our brothers and sisters—all of whom are beloved children of God.

This is our choice—whether to allow ourselves to be possessed by God’s love for all or evil’s divisive power. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.