

LOCK UP YOUR PIGS. JESUS IS IN TOWN!

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

Luke 8:26-39 NRSV

I don't know if you've heard the news or not, but the National Pork Council is looking for a new slogan for pork. After 23 years, “Pork, the Other White Meat” is going away and they are searching for another slogan. I heard about this on National Public Radio, and to go along with the story, they had a place on their web site for people to offer suggestions of what the new slogan for pork could be.¹ I picked a few of them (the few I could read in church) and thought I'd share them with you this morning.

- Bacon: its meat candy.
- Pork: you're going to die soon anyway.
- Pork: if it wasn't awesome why would vegetarians be making fake versions of it?
- Pork: because you might not be getting enough government-subsidized corn in your diet already.
- Pork: something that Israelis and Palestinians can both agree upon.
- Pork: it's so good it's the only meat used to wrap other meats.

I'm a firm believer that bacon makes everything taste better; even though it may make our cholesterol levels rise too. So, when I read today's Gospel passage which tells about the pigs running down-hill and drowning themselves in the lake after the demons have gone into them, all I can think is, "What a terrible waste of bacon!" I've always been very concerned about pork, but when I read this Bible passage growing up, I was less concerned about bacon and much more concerned about the deaths of the innocent pigs. I'm pretty sure it was *Charlotte's Web* that did it for me; it was Wilbur; the little piglet protected by Charlotte the spider, who was in my mind. I read this story and imagined a whole pack of Wilburs that Jesus didn't seem to care about at all. For me, this passage was all about the pigs.

When we consider the first century context, early Christians, most of whom were Jews, would not have been concerned in the least about the fate of the pigs. Pigs were unclean animals, outside the realm of what was proper to eat. They would have thought, "Well, what do you expect when you raise pigs?"

Of course a preoccupation with the fate of the pigs ignores what the real focus of the passage is; the healing of this man possessed by demons. This story, like the stories just prior to it in Luke, demonstrates Jesus' power over all creation: the physical parts of creation and the spiritual parts. Jesus has just demonstrated that he can still a storm as they sailed across the Sea of Galilee (Luke 8:22-25), now Jesus is demonstrating that he has power over the forces of evil who have been let loose upon the face of the earth.

I do find it interesting that Jesus doesn't just zap these demons and make them disappear. Jesus doesn't just kill them or send them off someplace. It seems to me that the fate of these pigs tell us something about the preponderance and even the seriousness of evil. It demonstrates that when evil is cast out it doesn't just disappear. Evil hangs around, and it continues to be destructive, and ultimately it is *self*-destructive. It returns to itself and is even suicidal.

Whether one chooses to believe today in the reality and existence of demons or chooses to simply understand stories like this one as metaphors about the power of evil, the story demonstrates that evil is not easy to get rid of. When it's cast out of one place it still hangs around and causes problems elsewhere. We should not be surprised, if we are willing to take on evil and its many forms in our culture and even in our lives, that evil does not simply go away easily or quietly. When we choose to face the evil that we do as individuals, the evil that we commit corporately as humans, the evil that exists in all sorts of power structures in our world, there is often a price to pay.

Evil has some particular functions in this passage. The demons afflicting this man forced him to live out away from community, from society, among the tombs in a cemetery. He has been stripped of his humanity, no longer is clothed and no longer is in his right mind. Even efforts to subdue him, guard him, and chain him have failed. Nothing can keep this man within society.

Often that's the way of evil, by whatever name we want to call it and however we wish to understand it; evil isolates, evil destroys community, and evil separates people from those whom they love. Indeed some of the times when we feel the loneliest are when our own actions have cut ourselves off from relationships with other people. The destructive nature of our betrayals, our broken vows in relationships between spouses and partners, our forgotten commitments to children and to community often result in people isolated and alienated from one another.

Furthermore, corporately, we create forces whose very purpose is to divide us one from another. We need only to look around at our community, our nation, our world, to see how much energy is devoted to separating us one from another. Our political system and our culture are dedicated to placing each of us on one side or the other. Similarly the religious voice of the church so often in our culture is hell-bent on declaring, "These are the ones whom God favors, and those are the ones going to hell." We can see the subtle forces of division and alienation in our celebration of violence and our love of a type of sexuality that objectifies and dehumanizes people, and reduces them to a product. These acts of evil often end up producing people who have been dehumanized, who have lost any sense of their own value, as a person and as a child of God.

We humans seem unable to overcome the alienating and divisive power of evil; such is the case in our Gospel passage. It is only when Jesus shows up and casts out evil that we see this man again as a human being and a part of human community. After the evil has been dealt with, we find the man sitting at the feet of Jesus. Only a few people in Luke's gospel actually model what it means to be a true follower of Jesus, and when they do they are pictured as sitting at Jesus' feet. The woman who anoints Jesus with ointment whom we spoke about last week sat at the feet of Jesus (Luke 7:38). Mary, who is sister to Martha, sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to his teaching (Luke 10:38). At the feet of the one you choose to follow was the proper place of a student, or a follower in the ancient world.

So this former demoniac, former possessed man, former outcast becomes a paradigm, an example, a symbol of what it means to be a true and proper follower of Jesus. Indeed we find at the end of the story that he becomes the first person to go out and proclaim the good news to the Gentiles, the people outside of the Jewish religion and culture. He has become a lesson to us of what the power of God can do to change people's lives.

It's no accident that God gave us the church, a community of people called to sit at Jesus' feet, as a way of drawing people in from the margins, from the outside. The church is to bring the outcast back into community, back into society. Unfortunately, in our culture it seems the church exists to exclude people and push them out to the margins. The church is probably the last place someone who is an outcast can truly be found, because the church is on the leading edge of excluding people, for all sorts of reasons: wrong belief, wrong way of voting, wrong way of living, wrong sexual orientation, wrong class, wrong race. The church excels at using God as a means to justify sending people out to the tombs. The church has become a tool of systemic

evil, rather than a force for reconciliation. The church has forgotten it is called to help people to become living demonstrations of how God can restore even the most alienated person.

It's interesting that in this passage Jesus asks for the evil spirits' name. It (they?) replies, "Legion." In other words, so many spirits have come into this man that they are as numerous as a Roman legion. In this man, thousands of spirits, multiple problems, and evil forces are at work. Similarly, the problems that dissect people's lives, people who are on the outside in our city, our world, our nation, are often not simple problems. Their lives are torn apart often not by one problem, but by problems that are manifold and complex. If the problems were simple, then we'd be solving them all the time, but there's a good reason we--people are called to reach out to the outcast--don't do so. It's messy. It's difficult. It involves risk and who has time for it? At least in this story, Jesus' actions imply that the beginning of dealing with evil is by naming it.

I was blessed in my church in New York to have a number of folks who were recovering alcoholics invite me to open AA meetings. Open meetings allow people from outside of the meeting to come, usually in order to celebrate anniversaries of sobriety. One of the men in my church was celebrating 25 years of being sober and brought me to his celebration. Even though he got up to accept his coin for 25 years, he still named himself as an alcoholic: "Hi, I'm _____. I'm an alcoholic." He realized that his addiction still had power over him. He named himself as an alcoholic, because one of the first steps that AA and other anonymous groups teach is admitting that you have no power over your addiction, rather it has power over you.

I wonder if it might not be a bad idea for us Christians to also begin our introductions by naming the evil in our lives. "Hi, I'm Chase. I'm greedy." "Hi, I'm John. I'm selfish." "Hi, I'm Mary. I am someone who has broken my vows." "Hi, I'm Mike. I'm an adulterer." "Hi, I'm Jane. I've stolen things." I wonder what it could be like if we could name our sins and admit that they rule over us. Of course we don't do that so blatantly, because that type of confession can be abused in a lot of ways. It seems to me, however, that if we are willing to look for God's power to take on the evil in our lives, then we must begin by acknowledging our need for God to do so. We, as people of faith, often don't even want to take that step. We don't look for God to be a power in our lives, because we don't wish to acknowledge our need for God to actually change us or change the world around us. Our own sinfulness, the evil that works in our own lives is often too multi-layered and complex for us to realize our need. Our problems are legion.

If we cannot acknowledge our sinfulness and our own complicity in the world's evil, then we will not be able to take the next step, which is as people of God, to say, "Hi, I'm Chase. I'm forgiven." "Hi, I am Samantha, I'm forgiven." "Hi, I'm Mark, I'm forgiven." I think that we would better see the need for reaching out to the outcast, if we could acknowledge our own need for forgiveness and then receive the joy of what it means to be forgiven.

Those of you who have heard me preach before know that I was raised as a Southern Baptist, and I've often told you of the darker side of that denomination's tradition. There is a better side, however. Once upon a time, Southern Baptist seminaries actually produced people who really were willing to take the teachings of Jesus regarding reconciliation seriously instead of seeking to judge and control others. One of them was a man named Clarence Jordan, a graduate from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kentucky. Jordan went down to southern Georgia, and based upon his reading of the Sermon on the Mount, founded Koinania Farms in the early 1940's. There he and the people with him began hiring black sharecroppers. They began to include these descendants of slaves who had inherited the results of generations of poverty. They invited those who had been unwelcome in white circles to help work their farms, share in the profits, and eat together as equals.²

Jordan's work to overcome the evils of racism did not go over well among his neighbors. Night riders came and shot up their farm house at night. Klan members tried to intimidate and to threaten. But still Jordan and his friends kept going. They began buying more land and selling it to poor whites and blacks at whatever price they could afford. They risked their lives to demonstrate radical inclusion, because this was their reading of the message of Jesus.

Jordan was quick-witted, and he often put that wit to use in disarming ways. He was with a preacher one day, the story goes, and the preacher was showing off his church building. He showed Jordan the imported wood pews and other expensive church furnishings. They walked out of the sanctuary just as the sun set and the spotlight came on to illuminate the cross at the top of the church steeple. The preacher bragged, "That cross alone costs \$10,000." Jordan looked at him and replied, "You got cheated. Times were when Christians could get them for free."³

We don't like free crosses, because to receive a free cross, we have to have done something worthy of being crucified. Our expensive crosses that we wear as jewelry and decorate our churches with don't demand anything of us. In our passage today, notice that when the crowd showed up, they were afraid and because of their fear they asked Jesus to leave. They didn't like this miracle that had happened among them, and they didn't want that formerly demon-possessed man around either. Why not? I believe it was because he was the representation of what God could do to change people's lives and to change their world. They, like us, would prefer a God who leaves us alone. We want crosses that do not cost us anything.

I feel sympathy for the gathered onlookers in this passage. They'd already lost a fine herd of pigs, what else might happen if Jesus began casting out evil and transforming the rest of their lives? Transformation, God's transformation, costs something. It costs us our comfort. It costs us our convenience. It causes us to sacrifice things that matter very much to us: our pride, our sense of self, and our belief that we have made ourselves rather than God having made us. There is a cost to acknowledging the evil in our own actions and facing the evil in our world and society. Evil doesn't go away quickly or lightly; it causes damage on the way out, just as it

caused damage on the way in. If Jesus is around casting out evil, making outcasts into insiders, then some pigs are going to have to die.

Amen

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¹ The pork industry's search for a slogan was discussed on the June 13, 2010 broadcast of the wonderful public radio show "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me." The listener suggestions were offered on the show's on-line blog: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/waitwait/2010/06/14/127834838/pick-pork-s-new-slogan>.

² Dallas Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence: The Story of Clarence Jordan and the Koinonia Farms Experiment (1942-1970)* (New York: Harper, 1971).

³ Joyce Hollyday, "Clarence Jordan: Theologian in Overalls," in *Cloud of Witnesses*, Edited by Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 68.