

Year C Proper 7 - 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

*The 19th day of June in the year of our Lord 2022 +++ Church of the Holy Apostles, Penn Wynne
RCL Track 2*

Today's Gospel is off-beat, puzzling, and a little sinister, isn't it? Jesus and his disciples are on the eastern side of the lake of Galilee, opposite of the towns and fishing villages where most of them grew up. It is a predominantly Gentile area. Here Jesus and the disciples encounter a man who is possessed by demons. He is from the city, we are told, but because of the demons that torment him, he must live in the tombs, apart from his family and neighbors. He is a terror, in fact, to the nearby inhabitants who attempt to keep him chained and shackled. They keep him under armed guard for their own protection, but without success.

All of this is disturbing in and of itself. Then Jesus shows up. The demons who torment the man recognize Jesus for who he is. They cause the man to cry out: "what have you to do with us, Jesus, the son of the most high God." It is noteworthy that the supernatural beings occupying this poor man know exactly who Jesus is even when the people who encounter Jesus in this story do not, even when Jesus' own followers struggle to understand. It is crystal clear to the demons. For his part, Jesus demands to know who the demons are, and they reply that their name is Legion for they are many. All the sudden there is another socio-political layer added to this story, a layer which does not negate the plain sense of the story, but points to a complex reality. A legion was a Roman military term, it referred to a force of about 12,000 troops and supporting personnel. The entire region of Galilee, both the predominantly Jewish areas and the non-Jewish areas were under Roman dominion. It was a tumultuous time, the Roman client ruler, Herod Antipas was barely keeping the lid on a pressure cooker of revolt and violence, and there was a general threat that legions of Roman soldiers could descend upon the region of Galilee at any time to restore "order" through violence and repression. Everyone knew that when Rome sent an army to occupy a place there would be disastrous consequences for most of its inhabitants.

It is fear and disaster that this occupying force of demons visit upon the unfortunate man. And the story keeps getting stranger. The demons clearly understand the authority Jesus has and they successfully plead with Jesus not to cast them into the so-called abyss. Jesus allows them to enter a herd of pigs instead. The loss of this entire herd of pigs as the demons cause them to run into the lake and drown, would have been had pretty serious economic and food security implications. This might explain why the residents adamantly desire Jesus to leave, despite Jesus' healing of the tormented man. There are a lot of unanswered questions in the fascinating passage. If I tried to address every one of them, everyone would adamantly desire themselves to leave before I was done.

So, I will cut to the chase, what are we to think of the evil powers we encounter in this passage, and what could this possibly have to do with us? This passage clearly shows us that the reality of evil in the world is complex. The evil that Jesus confronts in this passage is multi-faceted, a complex matrix of corrupt human institutions, of human choice, and human physiology. And, very clearly, there is a surplus of evil at work, a non-human, preternatural evil, demonic evil.

Popular culture is fascinated by the demonic. I could list dozens of movies and tv shows and books about them, and don't take my mention as a recommendation, but think about the cultural phenomenon that is the movie the Exorcist, and its innumerable imitators, all the way to the laughably cheesy Netflix series called Warrior Nuns, who as the name suggests are a secret order of nuns tasked with fighting demonic influence in the world. But, if popular culture is totally fascinated, the Church and especially our branch of the church is a little squeamish about the topic. Within Christianity we are often presented with a false choice when it comes to understanding demonic evil. On the one hand, there are paranoid Christians who see and react to demonic evil everywhere, and who do a lot of harm this way, as they tend to demonize their enemies, and stigmatize mental illness. I grew up seeing demons cast out of people who, far from being possessed by legion, maybe just needed a good therapist. But, the other response is to demythologize Scripture—that is, every time something supernatural occurs in Scripture or in our lived experience, good

or evil, to sort of wink and nod, and pretend there must be some “scientific” explanation. I don’t recommend either of these false choices. Week by week, we come here to encounter Scripture and we are invited to inhabit the world of Scripture, and to have Scripture interrogate us, every bit as much as we ask faithful questions of Scripture. I think a faithful reading and inhabiting of Scripture leads us to understand a continuity between the natural world and what we call the supernatural. A continuity, not a dichotomy—not, a false choice between the two. Science and psychology themselves yield evidence of the interconnectedness of our human emotional and psychological health, with human physical health with human spirituality. Health speaks to a holistic integration of all these facets. Disintegration, the fracturing of human personality, and bodies, this must be accounted for in various ways, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. This integrated reality of the human person has larger analogues with human societies, and with the entire created order. Just as there are dis-integrated humans, there are dis-integrated human institutions and societies, and such dis-integration, as we can see around us, threatens the integration of the entire world. And in every scale, wholeness and integration always includes the spiritual or supernatural dimension.

Scripture tells a coherent story about this. God created all things to be ordered toward loving relationship with God. But, love requires real choices, rebellion against God’s order is always a choice. Rebellion unleashes chaos and violence, leads to the distortion of lives and institutions and the creation of human orders that are not oriented toward love. This disorder and mal-order has infected all of creation. We are all both victims and participants, wittingly or unwittingly in structures of evil. Jesus comes to us as a healer of broken things, an exorcist who drives away evil in all its complex dimensions, sometimes in ways we cannot expect or completely understand. Jesus became human in solidarity with us in order to deconstruct evil from the inside out; and re-integrate all that is falling part. Jesus invites us to abandon our chaos and violence and to participate in God’s re-ordering of our ourselves and our environment toward a loving relationship with the creator.

We get a startling sense of what that order looks like in this passage. Jesus is more concerned with the wholeness and the dignity of this one man who has been afflicted by demons, than he is with pleasing the local Roman government, or the economy of that area, or the feelings of this man's neighbors. According to Luke, Jesus came to preach good news to the poor and the marginalized, and that means judgment against those institutions and structures and people who benefit from the dehumanization and the marginalization of others. Good news for the poor is experience at first as bad news to the rich—although, in the end, it is good news for us...I mean, them, as well.

Practically, we begin with the scale of our own choices and our own lives. Our first task as Christians is to worship together, and to pray frequently, every day. These practices serve to orient our lives, our wills and desires towards the goodness and love of God. This is how we live into the integration that God has provided for us by Jesus Christ. Further, we are invited to receive the healing offered to us by Jesus in a thousand ways, healing through the sacramental life of the church, healing through healthy and loving relationships, healing that cannot be explained or understood but springs on us as a surprise, the unmerited grace of a God whose love for us is superabundant, if only we have eyes to see it. But our task does not end there. We are called to trust that Jesus stands in solidarity with us in our suffering, and to stand in solidarity with those around us who suffer, the poor, the marginalized, those whose lives are shattered by violence. We are called to stand up against the demonic forces that seek to sew chaos and evil in our world. We are called to proclaim in word and deed that God's ordering toward love is stronger than demonic ordering toward disintegration, and dehumanization. Like the man who was exorcised, healed, reintegrated, we are called to go tell those around us what God in Jesus has done for us. Amen.