

Sunday 12 C 2010

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

June 20, 2010

Luke 8:26-39

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

This is the most famous exorcism in the Bible. A man is full of demons. Jesus encounters this man and his demons, and he is able to remove the demons into a nearby herd of pigs.

This morning, we are going to talk about this story as a metaphor for mental illness. With one big asterisk. The asterisk is that for the people who wrote the Bible, the fact that Jesus could cast out demons did not demonstrate his healing power. It demonstrated that he was Lord of all things. Casting out demons is something like calming the stormy sea, or walking on water. It means that Jesus is in charge of all things, even the things that are dangerous, harmful, or evil. Even death itself.

But this story also has some characteristics of illness and healing, as we are going to see. And we need to talk about mental illness in church, because more than one in four adults in our country will suffer from mental illness in any given year. In our congregation, one in four of us has suffered in the last year. About six percent of the population suffers from the very serious forms of mental illness. It's very real. Illnesses of the mind often go untreated. Sometimes the victims of these illnesses are further victimized by phony treatments. And psychiatry and neurology are new sciences, not nearly as advanced or as precise as the sciences that address infectious diseases or cancer or heart disease. So for all of these reasons, mental illness is often untreated, or poorly treated.

The man in this story is chained up by his townspeople. Because they don't know what to do with him. He breaks out of his chains and runs away naked. And according to our story, the townspeople repeatedly go after him and chain him up again. This really strikes me as an example— an almost comic example, if it weren't so tragic— an example of how we treat some mental illnesses. Even to this day, we must retrain patients, and commit them to locked hospital wards against their own will sometimes. But we have less drastic ways of coping that are just as crude. Avoiding people is one way we cope. There are depressed people at school, at the office, in our families, whom we avoid. They just go on and on and on about what's wrong with the world. The television comedy show *Saturday Night Live* has created a comic character called "Debbie Downer" who always says the most depressing things in the most inappropriate times and places. Like the townspeople, we sometimes just cope in the crudest ways.

In the story, the man cannot even speak for himself. Jesus interviews him, and the demons speak for the man. The man doesn't speak for himself. He isn't himself. And this is true for many illnesses, physical and mental. We become the disease. One of the challenges of being a doctor or a pastor is that you have to see the person, not just the disease. Jesus is able to do this. But so often, a disease takes over our lives, and even our identity. We become cancer. We become arthritis. We become bipolar disorder. We are no longer our selves anymore. Illness has taken over our selves like... like... well, like a demonic possession.

Another part of this story is that when Jesus exorcises the demons, and the man becomes sane and healthy, the townspeople are afraid of Jesus. They do not ask Jesus to heal others or to perform other signs. They want him to get out of town. Somehow they had gotten accustomed to the man being possessed. They didn't like the change. And in our own lives, when someone who is unhealthy begins to become healthy, it can upset the status quo that everyone else has accepted. This is what happens in the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. It happens when a person who previously had no self-esteem begins to stand up for themselves. We all got used to walking over them, and now they won't take it any more. Or when an addict begins recovery. That person's friends and family systems may resist that person's becoming healthy. And that's what we see in this story. The man becomes sane. The town pushes back.

And finally, the man wants to go away with Jesus, back to the Galilee side of the lake. The man sits at the feet of Jesus, which means that having been made right, he has decided to become a disciple of Jesus, a follower. But Jesus says, No, you can't come with me. You need to stay here, and tell people what God has done for you. Often, those with mental illness can become dependent upon our doctors, our counselors, our psychotherapists, our support groups. And sometimes becoming well again means that we must move on. And we don't want to. We've made a connection. And we want to stay. Like the man in this story.

The power of this story is that we see evil overcome with good, and we see dis-ease overcome by health. We see the before, during, and after. We see a metaphor for our own paths to healing, especially for the one fourth of us who have suffered from mental illness in the last year. The promise of this story is that Christ meets us in those dark and lonely places, those places where we are not even really ourselves anymore. And he restores us to wholeness and wellness, even when the world around us wants us to stay chained up. This is a graphic and real story. And its promise for those of us who suffer in any way, mind or body— its promise is equally graphic and real. Amen.