

Private Demons and Public Addictions  
Luke 8:26-39

A sermon by Jan Kinney  
Prospect United Church of Christ  
Seattle, WA February 12, 2017

It's interesting that the four Gospels mention demons more than any other part of the Bible. One of the major attributes of Jesus, as the embodiment of a loving God, is that he can free persons who have been possessed by demons. In the Bible, "demon" is the name for an external evil that becomes internalized and then acted out. Demons are sent out by the source of evil; they enter an individual from outside, possess that person, and take control of his or her actions.

In these times, those of us who don't take the Bible quite so literally tend to call demons "addictions" or "mental illnesses" or "personality disorders." But we also recognize the public demons—the public addictions—of racism, sexism, hatred of gay or lesbian or trans people, fear of strangers, and more. And we notice that these public demons can also take possession of individuals, who act out their evil. But they can also possess the victims of those actions as internalized racism, or sexism, and so on.

And think of PTSD—the natural response of humans who have seen or experienced or done things that are far outside normal human experience. This diagnosis was first applied to American veterans of the war in Vietnam. It's since been expanded to include civilian victims of war or other extreme trauma; persons who have experienced sexual abuse or other forms of extreme abuse; people who live in poverty; and those who live under systemic oppression.

Seattle is full of people who are acting out the pain of PTSD—self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, harming themselves and sometimes others, displaying their pain for the rest of the world to see. They used to be well hidden, but are becoming more and more visible. Private demons can be the megaphones for hidden public addictions.

In Luke's story, the most important public addiction is fear. Everybody seems to be afraid. The neighbors are afraid of the man with the demons. The demons are afraid of Jesus. The pigs are so afraid that they rush blindly off a cliff into the lake. And when the neighbors see the formerly naked man sitting quietly with his clothes on, they are afraid, and they beg Jesus to go away and leave them alone.

The man's demon is named Legion, which is the term for a division of the Roman army, about 3000 to 6000 soldiers. And the Legion that occupied the Galilee area was notable for its ferocity and violence, and its banner showed a wild pig.

All of this might be a hint that this man has gone crazy with grief, rage, and fear about what the Roman occupation has done to his people and probably to himself. Maybe he was a veteran of conscription. Or a farmer who had lost his land to Roman taxes. Or had had to sell his children to pay his tax. Maybe he had witnessed one too many crucifixions.

Whatever the external source of his possession, he's acting it out now. He breaks the chains the neighbors try to put on him, and either runs off into the wilderness, or throws himself down on the stony ground and hurts himself. Or he appears so threatening that people can't pass by where he lives.

But none of the versions of this story says he actually hurts anyone else. And in fact, he even has a function in this country. His job is to be the crazy one, the broken one, the Man with the Demons. He's the one who is acting out the terror, grief, and fury of the people living under a vicious occupier. Probably most of his neighbors have experienced the same atrocities. Yet they can go about their daily lives, minding their own business, trying to look harmless and invisible to the Romans, *because* he is nakedly acting out *their* collective suffering.

You probably know that often, in dysfunctional families, one person will subconsciously be appointed to be the "problem person." Everything that goes wrong is seen as that person's fault. All the others members can believe they are normal, or they would be if it weren't for that one person. It's an unhealthy system, but it gives the illusion of calm and stability. Everyone in it knows their role—victim, enabler,

abuser, silent observer—as long as no one questions the way things are. This also happens in groups like workplaces, political parties, and churches.

When the designated person somehow refuses to carry that burden any longer, the fragile structure of that family can fall apart. Suddenly, each member has to confront his or her own part of the family's malfunctioning.

So, might it be this man's craziness is what holds this community together? Everyone else gets to look saner, just by comparison. They can concentrate on his latest craziness—did he break his chains and run away again? Is he threatening people who are trying to get past the graveyard? Is his nakedness scaring the ladies? He's an interesting distraction from their personal issues. And of course, under everything, there is the Roman occupation and the quiet, seething anger of an oppressed people. The violence of the guy in the graveyard is a safe way to vent their own helpless fury at what they've seen and experienced. They *all* have PTSD, but only the man with the demons nakedly displays it. The rest of them can pretend they are well adjusted and peaceful.

So the story shows us a community held together by the *illusion* of serenity—except for that one weird guy who lives down in the graveyard.

The story that comes just before this one shows Jesus and some of his disciples in a boat, crossing the Sea of Galilee toward the country of the Gerasenes. The disciples are rowing. Jesus falls asleep, and a terrible storm comes up. The men are terrified, and they wake Jesus and beg him to save them. And Luke says, “And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm.”

Whenever the sea is mentioned in the Bible, it points toward chaos—that is, dangerous disorganization. Think about God putting the waters in their place, back in Genesis. Or Jonah on a ship that's about to sink in another terrible storm. But the power of God's love, which Jesus embodies, brings true peace even out of chaos.

So what these two stories show us is an example of love and fierce compassion creating a true peace out of chaos; then the false peace of a community where everyone but the poor man in the graveyard is in

denial; and finally, serenity and sanity for one man, and great anxiety for everyone else, who now have to deal with their own issues instead of loading them onto the madman.

Much of the book of Luke is concerned with social justice—the protection of the most vulnerable in a cruel occupation where even the house of God is corrupted. So there's a powerful political side to this story, too. You'll see in one of these sculptures that it's Roman soldiers who are turning into pigs and falling off the cliff.

In both stories, Jesus confronts chaos directly. He rebukes the wind and waves, and they are still. He rebukes the demons and they leave and take their chaotic terror with them. So here's another variation on the theme of giving back to Caesar what belongs to him. Fear and chaos belong to Caesar. They are his tools. Jesus gives them to the pigs—back to the Legion with the pig as its banner—and the man is calmed and sane.

\*\*\*\*\*

I talked earlier about demons in families, but that pattern of relationship happens in entire nations, too. America's public addictions have historically been kept hidden from many of its citizens. If you were white, middle class, Christian, and heterosexual it was easy to believe that anyone could succeed by obeying the rules and working hard. But of course the addictions were obvious to those who were at the wrong end of the American dream. They knew all along about the systematic disrespect and violence that held them in place.

But now there's no hiding the addictions, for anyone. This election showed the world how powerful those demons are. This president, as an individual, is very likely a sociopath, and a toxic narcissist. But he sits in the White House as the representative of a large part of our population that tolerates or even approves of violent suppression of people of color, greedy takeovers of public lands and pollution of drinking water, legally sanctioned discrimination in business and hospitals. This president is not an anomaly. He's acting out the illness of the community that put him there, like the man in the graveyard.

And like the neighborhood in the story, we are in occupied territory. In 2007, Naomi Klein wrote *The Shock Doctrine*. She describes what she

calls “disaster capitalism”—economic vultures who exploit either natural disasters like a tsunami or economic and political chaos like the assassination of the President of Chile in 1972. As people are reeling from the disaster, confused and disoriented, disaster capitalists move in and push through policies that make them very rich, and impoverish the rest of us.

Since the inauguration, we have been battered daily—or even several times a day—with cruel and arbitrary executive orders, insults to foreign governments, and outrageous appointments to the Cabinet and Supreme Court. And many of us have been trying to react to everything; we call our senators about every appointment, we show up for every march and demonstration, we read and forward every bit of awful news. We’re three weeks into this administration, and we’re already exhausted.

What’s happening is that we are being set up by and for the vultures, in this man-made state of disorder. We are being manipulated into personal chaos by a hail of executive orders that overturn everything we believe is decent and right.

How do we cope with this without going insane?

We look at what Luke teaches us in these two stories. First, we can’t live in denial of what’s happening. We have to name the demons, and demand that they name themselves, keep calling out the lies. I’ve noticed in the last week that several friends have mentioned the Shock Doctrine, as if that truth were suddenly in the air and we all finally recognized what was happening. And when we can see what’s being done, we can stop acting out this demon by reacting to it.

We can name and confront our own demons, too—looking honestly at the privileges of whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, Christianness—and we can learn what it means to be an ally to those who don’t have those privileges.

We can bring our fierce compassion to the struggle and to ourselves. We can stop exposing ourselves to the constant barrage of stimulus. We can turn off the TV, take a break from Facebook, set the alarm to play Bach instead of NPR. We can stop to analyze the latest panicky e-mail before we succumb to its energy. We can give ourselves permission to rest up for the long haul, and to pace ourselves. This doesn’t mean

denying what's going on. It means refusing to obsess over it, refusing to fall into panic.

We can sing together. Group singing reduces the level of stress hormones in our blood, and literally bonds us into one powerful body as we breathe together. That's why we sing hymns in church, and why we chant and sing at protests.

This week I saw a video clip of Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon at the Obama White House. She was one of the Freedom Singers who sang on the marches against segregation, and she was the founder of the amazing African American women's a capella group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. This is what Dr. Reagon sang for President Obama:

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round, turn me round, turn me round,

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round, gonna keep on walking,  
Keep on talking, walking to the freedom land.

We can choose our battles. No one can do it all. We can concentrate on one issue, or two. We can call our senators. Or we can choose to go to protests and marches if we are able. Or we can let our politicians know what we want them to do, and thank them when they do it. And we can teach justice and compassion by example.

As we acknowledge and thank our living allies, we can remember and learn from our ancestors in struggle—those who have been standing strong for centuries: African Americans, native people, suffragists, gay and lesbian and trans activists, farm workers, those who fought for AIDS research and treatment, those who creatively confronted lynching and redlining and unequal education. Some of those ancestors are part of this church.

First and last, we remember God's fierce compassion that directly and creatively confronts evil and chaos. We look to the example of Jesus, and pray for the true peace that fierce love creates. We know that the power of the Holy Spirit is with us and within us in this work, and it calms and strengthens and sustains us for the journey.