

**Sermon**  
**St. Mary's Nanoose**  
**June 19, 2016.**  
**Luke 8:26 -39 (Jesus Heals the Gerasene demoniac)**

Today's gospel reading from Luke about Jesus healing a demoniac is a difficult one. Many who hear this story wonder and worry whether mental illness is a symptom of having allowed oneself to be possessed by demons. I think this is a dangerous road to go down; a road that if we look closely at the reading, and we attempt to model our lives after Jesus, would be a wrong turn. Jesus does not travel around judging, analyzing or diagnosing people.

The one judgment he does make is of religious leaders and others who put barriers between people and God; people who assume to make judgments on behalf of God. So if we look closely at the Gospel, we can trace Jesus' orientation to his healing the rift between a hurting person and God; helping to bring them back into right relationship with God. He doesn't seem to care what the rift was caused by. He just heals it; by healing the person. And showing the power of God to love and care.

In this passage from Luke, Jesus is traveling outside of Judea; he has traveled to the east and south into the land of the Gentiles. We also can tell he is away from the land of the Israelites because the people are farming swine, or, pig; an animal considered unclean by the Jews; an animal they are forbidden to eat. So as is Jesus'

custom, he is traveling beyond the borders of the familiar. And as he gets out of the boat onto land he is approached by someone on the fringe of society; someone who people do not know how to deal with, who displays difficult behaviour, who they've tried to constrain but is beyond their ability to deal with and has now been ostracized and lives in the tombs. The tombs, the places where the dead are buried, were also considered unclean by the Jews of Jesus' day and therefore a place no one would live; perhaps like the garbage dumps of South America where the poor and marginalized live today.

This man was an outcast, clear and simple.

And Jesus arrives. Does he seem afraid? No, the person who is afraid in this story is the man possessed. He recognizes Jesus' power and worries that here is yet another person about to terrorize him, dehumanize him, ostracize him. How does he recognize Jesus' power? Because Jesus is not afraid of him.

The man falls down before this power. Onto to his knees. What he doesn't know is that Jesus' power comes from God; and God's power is always for the Good. He begs Jesus, "Do not torment me!" and Jesus asks him his name. Jesus doesn't call him by any diagnosis. He doesn't even see him with eyes of judgment. He honours the man by asking him his name. The man so honoured, speaks the truth to Jesus. The name the man gives - "Legion" - tells us that he is not himself. He is not in his right mind. He has been

overtaken by many internal voices that cause him to self-harm and run wild in the hills.

How many of us are anxious about many things? Don't we all hear voices that tell us we are not lovable, not good enough, that we haven't or are not doing enough?

How many of us know firmly and deeply that we are loved by God; that we were known and loved before we were born and ever will be?

How many of us believe the diagnoses and judgments of others, and live up to them?

Most of us have a legion of worries and concerns and fears that we deal with on a day-to-day basis. The man in today's gospel was not labeled by Jesus, he was not rejected by Jesus. No, Jesus considered him worthy of his attention, his concern and proceeded to heal him by helping him name his condition and then relieving him of it.

As with this man in today's gospel, Jesus calls each one of us to be the person we were created to be. And when we struggle with the voices in our heads that tell us we're not good enough, we're not educated enough, we're too sensitive, selfish, or whatever labels we've taken on over the years, his presence helps us remember and know *who* and *whose* we really are.

Coming to our senses is something very difficult to do on our own. In this story we learn that when it seems we are beyond

redemption, when others have hurt and ostracized us so much, we need divine power to redeem us. Whatever afflicts us, this story tells us that Jesus isn't afraid of what's going on inside us. Too often we don't have the support they need to become vulnerable because when they do, they've been hurt. So when it's safe and possible for us to admit our need and when we sense God's presence, we can open up to God's power for healing. We need each other. We all need community, and the support of others. We have been created to be the Body of Christ.

This story isn't about mental illness. It's about Jesus. And it's about us. How do we emulate Jesus? Do we approach others without fear? Do we call them by labels, or by their name? Do we extend love with all the power at our command, or do we ignore, rebuff, or turn away from others in their time of need?

Our impulse is usually to turn away from suffering because it stirs us up. Other people's suffering reminds us of our own suffering or makes us worry that we too might suffer. We can almost act like suffering is contagious. But as with everything he does, Jesus turns things upside down. Like a magnet, he tells us, turn it around. So that when you feel repulsed by, or afraid of a person or situation, draw near. Do the opposite of what you initially feel. Compassion is something we have to work to develop. The heart is a muscle that needs exercising. It doesn't always come naturally. We learn how to open our hearts in community; with

each other. Opening one's heart takes courage, and the willingness to suffer oneself. Jesus showed us that by his willingness to walk to the cross. And he reminds us that this is the good news. No compassionate act goes unnoticed; not one act of love goes unredeemed. Every act of love changes the universe and brings new life. Every act of love emanates from and returns to the heart of God.

When we don't exercise our hearts and learn how to be compassionate, we run the risk of creating "the double whammy effect." When a person suffers deeply, and people turn away and don't respond to them, it causes them to suffer doubly.

I think of my godson who at 2 years of age was diagnosed with brain cancer. Not only did the family have to deal with this crisis and all the time and energy his treatment entailed, but they had to deal with the awkward responses of the people around them. Slowly, over time, after the initial outpouring of support, people stopped coming around or calling. Suddenly my friend found herself isolated while she dealt with this incredibly scary and demanding illness. She couldn't believe what had happened to her and her family. They were being treated as social pariahs. A double whammy.

Today we acknowledge National Aboriginal Day and this gospel reading couldn't be more fitting. How many people are ready to stand by a peoples who have been so traumatized? Too

often we inflict the double whammy effect when we judge those who have suffered in ways we can't imagine, and wouldn't want to imagine. It is so incredibly sad the kind of suffering Canadians continue to inflict on their aboriginal neighbours through their impatience, their judgment and their lack of concern. We have a lot of work to do to become good caring neighbours with those we share this beautiful land with.

Today is also Father's Day so I want to briefly acknowledge all fathers and the unique role they play in creating strong families and communities. Hopefully our own fathers helped create a positive image of the ultimate One whom we call Father, but who really is beyond all definition.

And I will quickly mention my own father. He suffered terribly during his time in the concentration camps of WWII and felt his survival was a miracle and as a result loved life so much. His war experience scarred him. He didn't share his story easily because people didn't understand and would say things that he didn't enjoy. He knew about the double whammy effect and so kept his experiences mostly to himself.

So the moral of this story, as I've been drawn to see it, is that pain is part of life. Jesus didn't come to eradicate suffering; he came to show us that we are loved and cared for in our suffering. In that way, suffering is eased. In our attending to the suffering in ourselves and others. He honours us and reminds us that we are

never alone. God is with us. And when we let that huge truth in, our suffering will be transformed. And we will be in right relationship with God.

So what can we learn from this story? To be like Jesus. To be loving, to be Love. To not avoid suffering, but to journey with others through it. Never judging others, never assuming to know or evaluate their story or their pain, but to walk with them towards the light. Ever trusting that with God, all shall be well. In ways we couldn't ask or imagine.

Thanks be to God.