

As you know, there is a suggested cycle of readings (“common lectionary”) for the Christian. This morning...since it is Father’s Day and all, I was so tempted to ditch the suggested Gospel reading, since really, who wants to talk about demons and a herd of pigs squealing as they rush over a cliff and drown in a lake?? Or just sum up the story: We know that “Pigs Can Fly” but this Bible story let’s us know they can’t swim! But on the other hand, it IS intriguing, especially to find out what others have said about this strange bible story... Don’t worry, some time with “As the Deer panteth for the water” by the end of the sermon!

So, regarding the “demon-possessed” man, often called the Gerasene demoniac... We know that “mental illness” is the term that most people use nowadays to describe someone who shouts and screams, does not care to put on clothes, and may at times has extraordinary strength to break restraints. My view or interpretation is that there are psychological, physiological, and spiritual understandings of mental illness, so healing should also be for mind, body and spirit. Jesus had healing powers, psychologically through his truthful confrontation, and spiritually through a supernatural powerful energy. Back then there were no psychiatric drugs for the body, though I suppose that Jesus would have been open to wholistic approaches to healing, herb teas and the like.

I am open to the idea of evil forces... the spiritual level of the story. Fred Buechner, former chaplain at Phillips Exeter Academy, says that we can take the Devil seriously if we take seriously the idea that “the total evil in the world is even greater than the sum of its parts.” There is indeed monstrous, murderous, demonic evil in our world; we see examples of it everywhere! Consider that our Bible is full of stories of “angels and demons.” Many people speak of guardian angels... perhaps felt in the inner spirit. If there can be angels, then logically there can be demons as well.

And consider this strange story about the herd of pigs. We know that things in the emotions and spirit can indeed transfer from humans to animals and vice versa. Think for example of a dog trained, by humans, to attack and kill. It’s a transference of the spirit of hostility and aggression. (Thank goodness most examples of transferences between animals and

humans have to do with love and comfort!) One New Testament scholar imagines that the confrontation of Jesus with the “demon-possessed” man, probably caused screaming and shouting in the man, which could easily have scared a few pigs to run away, over the cliff... and the rest of the herd, in herd mentality, just follow the leader and also wind up in the lake below. It seems one plausible explanation - that a frenzied spirit can spread, from humans to animals, pigs in this case.

When I think of the *psychological* level of this story, I am drawn to the part where the “demon spirit” calls Jesus by name, (O Son of the Most High) and Jesus responds in kind by asking “What is *YOUR* NAME?!” Who is the real you? There is something about TRUTH-TELLING that can be healing! We know that Jesus once said “The Truth will set you free.” In this instance the Truth involves Naming... Being honest about who you really are, what’s going on inside. For so many people, healing comes through finally voicing one’s true authentic self. For many it comes through a good therapist/counselor who helps us to see ourself more clearly... our strengths, weaknesses, our sufferings and joys in life. And surely healing can come from simply sharing our inner truths with trusted friends or trusted family members.

On the other hand, chronic mental illness can result from wearing masks, presenting false fronts, hiding from the truth, or running away from the truth. After addressing Jesus as the Most High, and confessing that there is a whole “legion” of evil inside this man, what does the demonic spirit say? “Don’t torment us!” In other words, Jesus, please don’t confront us with truth about our reality in this man and our real intentions. We would rather run away.

One Bible interpreter put it this way: “The first step toward wholeness is to face the facts; and the facts can be disagreeable. It is more pleasant to escape. Facts can be hostile if we challenge and thwart them... and supportive (I’d say transformative) if we accept and respond appropriately. The commentator reminds us that being healed and in our “right mind” means “being responsive to the full range of reality, a glad acknowledgment of truth, wherever it may be found, whatever it may be!” This implies repentance and transformation, that we may have to know the

pain of God's judgment before we can know the joy of God's salvation. Other interpreters have said: "The Truth will make you flinch before it will set you free."

A country or nation might even say, we don't want to hear the truth about death and destruction in our land, it could involve consequences, repentance, and work for change; we would rather run away than tell the truth. The sad truth of the people in the land of the Gerasenes was that they prized their herd of pigs more than the healing of their homeless person. I once heard an intriguing sermon on this story that delved into many economic meanings and applications ... in short, that Jesus was always a disrupter of the status quo if needed, and that Jesus, by working to heal the man, while allowing the pigs to stampede over cliff, was putting a priority on healing human life, over the livelihood of some pig farmers, who most likely were doing quite well. There is often some sacrifice made in the interest of a greater good, and in this case, some of the profits of the pig industry were sacrificed for the soul of the Gerasene mentally ill man. Human life and relationships need to have priority. We can remember this story as a metaphor for caring for the "least of these" in our society, even when some monetary profit might be sacrificed.

As promised, I will spend some time on the lovely Psalm 42 and Father's day. My simple message is one I mention often... is that we call out to God by many names, all good and true names... the Most High, (as the Gerasene man said,) or My rock, or My help (as Psalm 42 says)... or Father, Abba (as Jesus said) My Higher Power (as 12-step programs often say). Truly God, as the choir sang, is "Beyond" our mind and intellect, beyond all time and space; that's why we have many metaphors and many names for God... and that's just fine because we all are unique human beings... so naturally we have unique relationships with God.... and unique names that we might call one another. We know that intimate friends and partners usually have nicknames or pet names for one another. So why not with God?

The Psalm writer in Psalm 42 uses several names for God. Our writers in daily devotionals are often addressing God in different ways. Very few in the UCC address God as "Father" any more (being cautious

about the patriarchal bias of the Bible and the need for more feminine experience and imagery), but last week we heard the very earnest and faithful Rev. Chip Robinson imply that he used to be apologetic using the word Father, but no longer is so, enjoying the Trinitarian expression of Father Son and Holy Spirit.

The important thing is to call on God, by whatever name is most comfortable and meaningful to us! Similarly, we need to pray to God, presenting our authentic selves with utmost honesty, naming the truth of our lives. Similarly, in human relationships we need to speak our truth honestly with one another, uniquely with one another. If repentance and change is needed, so be it... forgiveness and reconciliation can happen... making peace with God, and making peace with one another. Among both friends and enemies, speaking one's truth authentically can always bring about greater understanding, and greater peace, all because of being truth tellers.

Then there will always be reason to have hope, to give thanks and praise like a deer who finds water, like our soul that has found living waters, the living waters of speaking the truth with love, the living waters of Jesus, who will ask us our true name! Come Lord Jesus, come Heavenly Father, Come healing Savior. Help us be our true selves, in the company of others who can be their true selves. Amen.