

This story of the Gerasene Demoniac has always fascinated biblical scholars. The commentaries are all over the map when it comes to interpretation.

But, one thing everyone agrees on is that demons destroy human life, and they come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Addictions are demons, and that can include alcohol, or gambling, or virtually anything where there's too much!

Bad relationships can be demons. Whenever there is abuse or neglect... That can lead to shame and guilt and depression and co-dependency...

Wars and violence create demons too. Being involved with Older Adult ministry I've heard stories... I have a friend who was in World War II, and I cannot even speak about the things he was asked to do on our behalf. Our country gave him a medal for one certain incident, that's all I can say. Then he spent the subsequent year in a hospital with what they called "Shell Shock". It's a demon he's lived with for the rest of his life.

These days it's called post-traumatic stress syndrome. And it not only affects people who have experienced war, but any kind of violence. Whether as part of a mass shooting, or rape, or even an accident. These demons are particularly vicious...

The Gerasene Demoniac is inhabited by many demons; there are many things destroying his life. He not only seems addicted to his misery, he's also in a very strange relationship with the community. There's some weird pattern of being bound and shackled and he breaks free and is driven into the wild... The text says

that it happened “many times.” You wonder if the community was somehow complicit, like it was a ritual.

In fact, they are not happy with Jesus, they asked him to leave! As the text says, “They were seized with a great fear.” Maybe the community needed this person and their little unholy ritual.

As in all relationships, the things that we suspect are true about ourselves and don’t like, are the same things we project onto other people. That happens to people, and it also happens in communities. When a community can’t face their own guilt or shame, they project it onto a victim.

Biblical scholars can’t agree on where this incident occurred. But they are quick to point out that the lake was a focal point for Roman occupation. These people had been under the thumb of Rome for a long time. They had been brutally subjugated. If they ever stepped out of line, they were tortured or crucified. Communities around the lake were broken and vanquished.

Perhaps the man that became the Demoniac, had been the victim of violence. And in addition, perhaps he’s also absorbing the guilt, shame and helplessness of an oppressed community. He’s living among the tombs... Not quite living, not quite dead; a little like the community...

There are a lot of interesting details and references in this story... The disciples had just survived a storm at sea, and now immediately they encounter a human

storm. Jesus stepped off the boat, and the Gerasene demoniac starts yelling, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”

Jesus asked for his name, and he said, “Legion.” Legion was what the Roman troops were called. And the Roman soldiers themselves, were often called pigs.

Interestingly, the healing of the man mirrored the political situation, a people possessed by outsiders, whose ultimate fantasy was that the Roman pigs would be drowned in the sea.

Jesus immediately sees through all this de-humanizing and shackling behavior and wades right into the heart of the matter. He looks into the eyes of the man who is completely bound up in his own demons and the community’s disfunction, and he heals him. He is set free.

The man comes to his right mind. And the community is not too happy about it! Perhaps Jesus took away their little unholy ritual. And interestingly, the man wants to go away with Jesus. But Jesus says no, he tells him to go home and tell the community what God has done. In other words, bring healing to the community as well. The Demoniac was healed not only for his sake, but also for the sake of the community.

In many ways, this is a story about bondage and of freedom. Which is somewhat like what was being played out between the man and the community. Except in Jesus’ healing, there is no victim. The change that Jesus brings, is complete restoration. No more victims... No more scapegoating...

This is like an Exodus story. A story of Hebrew slaves being set free from their bondage in Egypt.

And now, for us the question is, how are we set free from all the things that keep us tied up in knots. The things we are in bondage to; the things that keep us shackled...

Quick story... About seven and a half years ago I started swimming laps at the YMCA in Austin. When I started it was because my feet hurt... The doc told me to lose some weight and stay off my feet. So, I took him literally and started swimming. I was on a swimming team in Jr High so it wasn't really out of left field.

When I started, I was just having fun! I'd go to the pool and swim a bunch of laps and chit chat with the life guards... Yak with Dave, my new buddy also swimming laps.

Then I got really serious... I worked up to a mile a day and six days a week! Initially it felt wonderful and freeing that I could change my ways. I was breaking my bondage to eating too much and exercising too little.

I had a routine and I stuck to it. I was able to do that for about four years. I lost weight, felt great, more energy!

Then slowly my shoulders started hurting and swimming a mile every day was just too painful. So instead of swimming 36 laps every day, I trimmed it down to 30 a day and maybe five days a week... That became my new routine...

And I kept that up for a couple more years, then went down to 25 laps, which is where I'm at now.

You have to remember I've been doing this for going on eight years. It's my routine. Since I've moved back home to Welch, I've joined the Y in Red Wing, which also lets me swim in Hastings.

Now here's my struggle... To be honest, I'm afraid of losing my routine. And I feel guilty about it. And I feel like if I give it up completely, I'll be defeated.

And I kind of beat myself up about it. I know I need to swim, but I can't seem to find a schedule to get it done. The guilt is a little bit of a demon I'm dealing with.

My point is that guilt is something all of us deal with, and all the time. Whether it's eating, or exercising, or doing this or that... All of us have feelings of guilt and shame from time to time and we all deal with them.

The good news today, is that Jesus heals the Demoniatic. In and through Jesus there is a power to defeat the demons in our lives. A power that frees us from the shackles of guilt and shame, from addictions, and the powers that enslave our souls. This story of being in bondage and being liberated is the core story of religious transformation. It's the book of Exodus. This is what God does for us.

It is about the experience of letting go of guilt and shame and living fully present in the integration of who we fully are. It is a wholeness that dares to see a bigger picture... And that bigger picture is that God loves us exactly as we are. We are all Children of God, beloved and blessed, and for the sake of the world.

When I see myself as God sees me, I can let go of that guilt-- and lately, I've been patting myself on the back for actually getting out and swimming **once** a week! It feels freeing, it's alright, I'm seeing the blessing in it, and not the guilt... And sometimes, we need the time to work it out...

Oh, we beat ourselves up, we mess up, but God picks us up, dusts us off and sends us out again. And again, and again... It's what God does... He brings healing, wholeness and more... And Thanks be to God...

Amen