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 Luke 8:26-39
 Hudson
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SCRIPTURE: Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" – for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and was bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bond and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done through you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

SERMON: Let us pray: God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen (Reinhold Niebuhr)

Think of it: Devil possession, church sponsored exorcisms, demonology.

Imagine it: A young boy overtaken by 42 demons while playing on a canopied bed.

Multiple attempts at exorcism end in failure. Then a courageous, goodhearted older friend confronts the demons. He challenges them to leave the little boy and take him on instead.

They do.

And . . . unlike a bully on the playground who's always picking on kids half his size (the type who sheepishly back down when challenged by somebody bigger) – these demons don't back down. They take the older friend up on his offer and attack him. And now . . . now the older friend is possessed himself. And this friend goes and stabs and kills a man less than a mile down the road.

It sounds like a story straight out of the 17th century Salem witch trials, doesn't it? Or maybe out of some bad horror flick? Or some sort of antiquated superstition . . . like some strange beliefs that ran rampant in biblical times? It's not.

It happened in the late 1970's just a half mile from the church I served in Connecticut. A child was said to be possessed. Another man was taken by the trauma of the boy, by his great anguish. Apparently he was so moved by the boy's suffering – that he was overtaken himself. His sole defense in the murder trial: *Demonic Possession*

Look again at the eighth chapter of Luke. Jesus and his disciples took a boat across the Sea of Galilee. They took it to the other side. They took it into a land of the outsiders. And there, on that other shore – high above them up on the bluff – there was a lone soul who looked more the part of a beast than a man. He was crazed. He was naked. He was dirty and cut from self-mutilation. Eyes black piercing. Hunched like a cougar ready to pounce. His arms and legs were in shackles, but he'd broken the chains. Fish oils smeared across his stubbled face – a reminder of the meal he'd scavenged from the rotting garbage pits on the edge of town. Forced out of community, away from the place of his birth – the man lived among the tombs. His only company was the unclean, forbidden, repugnant pigs.

That's the scene. That's where Luke says Jesus entered. And Luke says that as Jesus approaches, a voice screams from within the man. But the man's just as surprised as anyone to hear that voice come from deep within him. So Jesus asks his name. And the man says *Legion* . . . which isn't a name at all. It's a number. A legion: a Roman fighting force of five or six thousand men. And that's the truth of it. Because in the torment the man's lived under, it does feel like a great battle among the thousands is being waged within him.

And that's where it was, according to Luke (out there on the outside where chaos prevails unprotected) . . . that's where Luke says that Jesus ordered those demons out of the man. And they were cast into those pigs, who took a bug-eyed sprint over the cliffs and drown in the deeps below. That's where Luke says Jesus restored the man to wholeness and health. And that's where Jesus told the man to stay . . . out on the edges where he could share the word of health and healing to those who needed it most.

Biblical times in distant lands . . . or our own day right under foot. It doesn't really matter. Call them spirit, demons, nymphs and angels. Or call them vices, crutches, habits, addictions and temptations. It doesn't really matter. The names don't change any of it. Depression, anxiety, fear and compulsive behavior creep into so many lives. And . . . and they consume so many relationships: marriages destroyed, children alienated, friendships lost.

I challenge you. Show me just one well balanced emotionally stable life . . . and I'll show you ten who carry so much baggage they can barely make it out the door each morning. The gospel says we can be freed. Like that nameless man (known only as Legion) . . . the one who is so distant, yet so close . . . who is none of us, yet all of us – We too, says the gospel, we can be freed from our chains.

Do you remember the prayer I shared at the beginning of the sermon? Most people know it as the serenity prayer. It's spoken in church basements all over the country. Most people assume it's an ancient prayer . . . maybe some sort of rabbinical origin. It's not.

Most guess it's a translation from Latin, Greek . . . or at least from German. It's not. And pretty logically we'd be reasonable to assume it was written to a people going through a major trauma. And again . . . such an assumption would be wrong.

This prayer that has become the cornerstone for AA groups, was in fact written by the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1943 for a little church in the farming village where he summered with his family in Heath, Massachusetts. It was written for everyday people, going through their very real everyday struggles . . . much like our own. It was written for a people who were consumed by the demons of everyday living.

You see, the offer isn't just about the mentally institutionalized. It's not just about the hopelessly addicted. It's not just about the manically depressed. It is . . . in fact . . . about all of them . . . and it's about each one of us as well. We're told we can let go of that baggage that drags us down.

Remember that crazed man in the gospel? What did he do to deserve such torment? Scripture is silent on that. Who was he? Again, scripture has almost nothing to say . . . except that he was from Decapolis. Other than that . . . the man's anonymous. We don't know his name. We don't know how he got so messed up. And I guess that's the real gift of this bizarre story. On him, we can place our own stories. Because, he is in fact none of us. And yet, he is everyone of us. His trials and traumas are ours. His inner struggle is ours. And so is his release from burden.

And so . . . like Niebuhr . . . everyday people from everywhere, we come in prayer.

Let us pray: *God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen*