**Galatians 3:23-29**

**23**Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. **24**So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. **25**Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

**26**So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, **27**for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. **28**There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **29**If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

**Luke 8:26-39**

**26**They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee. **27**When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. **28**When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torture me!” **29**For Jesus had commanded the impure spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

**30**Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

“Legion,” he replied, because many demons had gone into him. **31**And they begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.

**32**A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission. **33**When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

**34**When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, **35**and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus’ feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. **36**Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. **37**Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left.

**38**The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, **39**“Return home and tell how much God has done for you.” So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

“And They Are Legion”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

June 19, 2022

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I lived in Gardner, MA for 17 years, the longest stretch of any in my adult life. Gardner is most widely known as the furniture capitol of New England. At one time there were over 100 different manufacturers of furniture. There are no longer any. One of the things that a booming business followed by a lack of business creates is poverty. Gardner is a poor town, and there are aspects of the town that are not a poor town. I had the privilege of choosing what part of town I purchased my home in so that my girls would have a safe community and so that they would be in a particular school for their first several years.

One of the people that I never got to know in Gardner, but whose face was very familiar to me was a man who I think probably resembled the “demoniac from Gerasene.” This gentleman was very thin, he had a lot of hair—long down his back and a beard bigger than even the most rugged Maine beard I have seen around here. He spent most of his afternoons in front of the Big Lots store at Tympany Plaza. I was a little afraid of him. He was homeless, or at least I assume so. I don’t know where he lived; I don’t know where he slept, to this day. I don’t know what it was that caused him to be without a home. I assumed some mental illness, which I assume not only because of what others had shared about “the crazy guy in front of Big Lots,” but also because I tried to conquer my fear by speaking with him; by greeting him. I did that twice, the first with *no* response and the second time with a response of a steely glance. It scared me a little. I was the only one on the sidewalk at that moment, and I worried about my safety. He didn’t say anything; he didn’t do anything apart from look at me, but I was afraid of him. I was afraid of him because I was worried about mental illness; because his poverty had him unclean. I would like for you to remember you have seen, whether locally or in some far off city so that you have that image of that man or that woman in mind as you think about the story of the Gerasene demoniac.

I’d like to ask you also to think about what is the “good life.” I’ve shared before that was the focus of my Introduction to Ethics course. We learned about what is “good” behavior, about what is “good” quality to enjoy. If you have that in mind, I wonder what it is that keeps us from it. What keeps any one person from enjoying the good life? For this morning, I am thinking about this man whose name I don’t know, in front of Big Lots

Some of the things that keep us from having the good life are things over which we have no control. It might be addiction. We might have inherited it; we might have developed it in response to circumstances in which we were trying to dull our sensibilities or our pain. It might be depression. It might be because of circumstances—losses, overwhelming grief; or chemical imbalance. It might be because nothing that we’ve done because of what our families are , and aren’t. Many of these things that keep us from the good life are internal, are personal. Other things that keep us excluded are external, or are part of the larger systems of which we are a part, that are part of what we hear in scripture referred to as the powers. And this particular scripture from Luke asks that we think about these powers, with a capital P. The legion of demons that afflict the man are something I want for us to think about. Let’s think about the legions and the definition of the world.

The “demoniac” is not the only wounded or sick element of the story, though the ways in which the community has responded to him are most clear. When he identifies himself as “Legion” there is a truth that bears our attention for a time. One of the ways we use the word even now is to mean countless. There are countless, legion of reasons that I was unfocused this week. There are legions of reasons that we are gathered here this morning. There are a legion of opportunities when we leave here. Then there is the use of the word that we forget about, but which was probably on Luke’s mind and Mark’s mind when they were writing. A Legion represents 6,000 Roman soldiers. So, the demoniac—the man who suffered from unknown illness that kept him excluded—this man named the occupation of his nation as part of his dis-ease. He named the lack of power under the Powers of the Roman Empire as part of his dis-ease. So, the people who were responding and who were keeping him excluded; who were *not* housing him. I would almost ask why, or what would you do. I know that the answer for me would be fear; fear of all the things we have already mentioned, and also fear of who he might become. It is the fear of the Empire as well. What happens when we give power back to those who have not had power? This is one of the questions at the root of this morning’s scripture.

And what does Jesus call us to do in response? This is why we read scripture. Jesus asks us to proclaim the good deeds that God has done---and is doing. Jesus heals the man, and Jesus invites us to heal others, through inclusion. It’s a simple fact. We have so many opportunities to heal, and we celebrated some of that this weekend and have the opportunity--and I would even share, the responsibility to do so today. Designating June 19th, Juneteenth, as a federal holiday was not a frivolous gesture. The symbolism of acknowledgement of previous inequality is significant and I’d like for us to pause for a moment to consider it with the lens of today’s scripture reading. Paul proclaimed in Galatians that with Jesus “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”  Still, we know that the divisions represented in these distinctions still exist and in many ways are being heightened in our time. So, making certain to celebrate the freedom of African-Americans as equal to the freedom of our nation as a whole—July 4th—is important. Naming the Powers is an important step toward dismantling them when they keep us bound.

What keeps us bound? What “seizes” us? -- the verb for “seized” used in this passage is used in others as well and helps us to understand something of what Jesus is addressing when he “frees” the man from the demons that possess him. One other use of the verb is the way that the disciples are shackled when they are imprisoned. It was just a couple of weeks ago that we hears about Paul’s being shackled with Silas. And by whom are they shackled? The same Roman occupying forces that are represented in the word legion have them bound. What keeps the man separated from the community that might help him is unfair governmental practices. The Jews and the Gentiles may be equal in Christ’s eyes, but the power is held by the Romans. I’m sure it is because of today’s holiday that I read this passage differently this year than I have previously. We are invited to think about nominal freedom—that is, freedom we hear about and don’t experience--and then true freedom, and we are invited to be part of making sure that true freedom and equality goes beyond name only and moves to a lived reality. So, who in our time, who in our lives is shackled by those demons of inequality under the Powers?

We could probably compile a long list and it wouldn’t be very much fun to do so. We may choose to chat about it a bit after the service today if you’d like. I would suggest another way of framing the question for us, as well. Of what inequalities are we afraid, should they be leveled? Remember the end of the story for the Gerasene demoniac: he sits comfortably with Jesus as a member of community, welcome and finally whole. And those who had seen this miracle? “asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear.” You see, under the reign of God, the Powers shift and that makes people afraid. Why are they more afraid after Jesus heals him than they were of the man when he was out of his mind? That has a lot to do with power, whose lack is perhaps the thing we all fear most.

And so the earthly Powers work really hard to keep inequalities in place. They look like war. They look like the prison industrial complex. They look like redlining whose effects are perpetuated in unequal educational opportunities, unequal opportunities for commerce and unequal representation in our judicial and legislative government.

And the earthly Powers look a lot like guns. When individuals or groups find themselves outside of the conversation and outside the communities that have decision making power, they will seize the power they *can*. Shackled by the legion of demons of hunger, disenfranchisement; locked out of and away from any sense of hope for circumstances to change in meaningful ways, people will do what they can to feel powerful—in all the wrong ways. People will work for safety whose paradox we recognize in death tolls and funereal remembrances. The demons are legion.

And salvation from that mess still looks the same. Our gift of saving Grace continues to be the welcome of community and an equal voice at the table. Our gift of saving Grace continues to be loving our neighbors as ourselves—widening the welcome and making the table larger and larger still. I am thrilled to be here in Blue Hill, where there is excitement and energy around events like yesterday’s Pride celebration, which acknowledges the reality that while LGBTQ+ persons may be recognized as equal under the law, discrimination and othering still exist. I am thrilled that we will celebrate another day of recognition here tomorrow evening when we take further steps toward welcoming refugees into our community on World Refugee Day. Each time that we move toward a more welcoming community, we step toward freedom of the kind God offers. And so we may ask ourselves what persons, what demons we are sometimes afraid of and what we can do to move past our fear into more freeing love. Is it the demon of mental illness that makes us turn away? Is it the demon of racial or judicial injustice—or of racial and judicial inequality? Is it the demon of war and its effect of displacing persons? What are the legion of ways we may unshackle others for a free life of love in God and community? It is my prayer that we may we live into the hope and the promise of such a full life! Amen.