

The Asked Jesus to Leave

Luke 8:26-39

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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Every story invites us to jump in and try on the shoes of other people. Try to do that with me this morning. Think about the man named Legion, the demons, the swineherds, the people of the surrounding area, and the disciples who witnessed this story.

LEGION: His name is "Legion." He's called Legion because he is possessed by a legion of demons. His disease has become his name. There's no space anymore between who he is and what he has. That's not so hard for us moderns to imagine. We know that our malady often becomes such a part of us, that "we" seem to disappear while our disease, it's debilitating affects, our treatments take over our lives. Call me Parkinson, Lou Gerig, prostate cancer, bi-polar, rheumatoid arthritis, depression, Covid.

Legion is not the name his mother gave to him. His name was Chuck, or Marcus Arelias, or Sam. When he was born, she did not name her son Legion.

But that's who he became. His disease defined him.

Who are you? What is your name? What do you allow to define you? Some of us define ourselves by our jobs. I'm a pastor, and I'm honored to be called your pastor. I'm a grocer. I'm a professor. I'm a farmer. When we retire, or when we cannot longer work, we sometimes don't know who we are any more.

When my friend Frank got Bell's Palsy, he could no longer operate. I went to visit him in these early days. He held up his shaking hands and said, "I'm some kind of surgeon." We are human "beings" not human "doings." Sometimes we forget that.

I've read accounts of men or women who identify themselves as Mr. or Mrs. So-and-so, but after the divorce they aren't sure who they are anymore.

Some scholars say Jesus isn't talking to the man at all. Jesus is talking to the Demon. That's not what I read. Jesus is asking the man, "What is your name?" And instead of sharing his name, he shares another part of his identity, the part that has taken over, the part that has possessed him. *My name is Legion.*

Who are you? What is your name?

Part of the message here (and it's not the essential message of this text, but part of it) is we are

- more than our job,
- more than our history,
- more than our sickness,
- more than our family,
- more than our bank account,
- more than our failure,
- more than our worldly success,
- more than our resume,
- more than our police record,
- more than our report card,
- more than our sin,
- more than what other people have written about us on our permanent record.

We are more than that. We are more than enough.

Jesus doesn't know the man's name, but Jesus already knows who the man is: *You are a child of God. You are my brother. You are created in God's image. You are beloved to God. You matter. You are important. You are loved. No matter what, you are loved.*

Jesus knows who this stranger is.

Jesus knows who we are.

And Jesus is here to tell us that God loves us, and we are called to love each other.

THE DEMONS: The Demons are terrified of Jesus. They know their place. They know that Jesus has power over them. They know they have no place in God's peaceable kin-dom. They know they can't win. They know their days are numbered.

THE PIG HERDERS: The swineherds/pig herders seem like innocent bystanders or, even, victims at first. (I don't think they are.) But when Jesus exorcises the demons and allows them to go into the pigs, the pigs jump into the sea and drown themselves, suddenly the pig herders have lost their livelihood. And they are not pleased.

They run into the city and bring a crowd. We learn a lot by what they say, do, and don't say.

THE CROWDS: The pig herders and the crowds from the city arrive on the scene. They see the man named "Legion." He is sitting there in his right mind. He's no longer naked and shrieking. He's no longer chained. He's whole, and sane, and present.

But the pigs? The pigs are dead.

Jesus has turned the world upside down. One man is saved, yes, but all those pigs are lost. (This story echoes the story of Jesus leaving the whole flock in order to find the one lost lamb.) One man is made whole, but the livelihood of many men appears to be lost.

The crowd is not happy for the man. The crowd doesn't rejoice for the man. The crowd doesn't thank Jesus. Nobody asks Jesus for an autograph. Nobody suggests that Jesus buy a cottage in town and set up shop. Nobody sings, "I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." Nobody hugs the healed man's neck. Nobody invites him to dinner. Nobody praises God.

The crowds and the pig herders are afraid.

The pig herders and the crowds were content with Legion's madness. They are not content with the change Jesus has wrought. If justice for one man means that we have to change our age-old patterns in this world, this is not acceptable.

(I'm thinking of the Jim Crow laws that ruled this country after the Civil War into my childhood. If the laws were going to change and all people could drink water from the same water fountain, then all of the people who made those signs that said "white only" would be put out of business. These business owners had

something in common with the pig herders in our ancient story from the Bible. They both were mad at the change that God's love required.)

Jesus is a theological bull in a china shop. If he sticks around, there's no telling what's going to break, what's going to change. We'll have to organize our government differently, our religious institutions differently, our businesses differently, our families differently. Jesus with his love, with his ideas of Justice, is going to turn our lives upside down.

These fearful, narrow-minded citizens do the only thing that seems polite and sane to them: they ask Jesus to leave. They don't run him out of town, but we get the clear impression that, if need be, they will.

THE DISCIPLES: The disciples see in the story Jesus as a lover of the human soul. They see Jesus as a caring person. And, increasingly, his power convinces them he is the one he says he is: the Son of God.

The disciples hear the witness of the man once known as Legion. Legion tells them (and they see with their own eyes): *I was trapped and chained and out of my head, but Jesus set me free to love others and to serve others. Hallelujah! I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see!*

The disciples also see that Good News for some, isn't always good news for everybody. Increasingly in the stories of Luke's gospel, the disciples are seeing how the crowds and leaders of the day may get so fed up with Jesus that they might one day arrest him. If the crowds get mad enough, and if Jesus steps on enough toes, they might even crucify him.

US: We've been invited into the story. What does this story mean for us?

This is a start for what it means to me.

The good news is that nothing is going to stop Jesus from loving the world clean. That's his calling. He's going to keep on keeping on. Wholeness, shalom, is his goal. Nothing is going to stop him from fulfilling his calling, not even crucifixion. God's love will abound, and God's love will abide. God's will will be done.

The man once named Legion, those disciples, and all the people Jesus influences are going to claim Jesus' calling. They are going to live that calling. And they are going to pass that calling to us.

Be hopeful.
Be faithful.
Be encouraged
Get busy . . .

In Jesus' name,

AMEN.

Luke 8:26-39 26Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27As 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. 28When 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"-29for 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 bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) 30 Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. 31 They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

32 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. 33 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.

34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35 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. 36 Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 37 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. 38 The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.