

Known by Name

Luke 8: 26-39 - 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 bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds 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 for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

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“What is your name? “

That's the question

Jesus asked the man

who was possessed by demons.

“What is your name?”

The man had run over to Jesus

the moment Jesus' boat

landed on the shore.

Jesus and his friends
had just crossed the Sea of Galilee,
their boat battered
by one of the fierce storms
that can suddenly arise
on that body of water,
wind sweeping down from the hills
around the large lake,
churning up the waves.

The storm had nearly
capsized their boat,
according to the verses
just before those Todd read.

But somehow Jesus had quieted them down –
had quieted the waves,
and wind,
and his friends.

I still bet they were glad
to set foot on land again.
And immediately,
with barely a moment
to catch their breaths,
to get their land legs back,
just “as Jesus stepped out on land,”
the story says,
another whirlwind
descended upon them unexpectedly –
“a man of the city who had demons”
raced to see Jesus.

For a long time
this man had worn no clothes,
and he lived out in the wild,
among the tombs,
without a real home.
His own townspeople
had chained him up,
afraid of him, but he broke loose and ran.
The man falls down
on the ground
and begins to shout at Jesus
in a loud voice,
frantic and pleading:
“What have you to do with me, Jesus,
Son of the Most High God?”

I beg you,
do not torment me!"

Imagine being there
and seeing this sight.
The naked, wild man,
shouting at the top of his lungs,
lying in the dirt.

And Jesus asks him,
"What is your name?"

You and I
might see a crazy man.
We might smell the stench
of someone who has not bathed
and lived outdoors a long time.
We might see the matted hair,
hear the jarring voice,
and step back in alarm
from the body by our feet.

We might see a crazy man.
But Jesus wants to know him,
and asks the man his name.
"What is your name?"

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Being known by name
makes such a difference,
doesn't it?
When a teacher
recalls who you are.
When another church member
greet you by name.
When two people see one another
on the street,
and can say hello
with more than a cursory nod.

When someone calls us by name,
it's as if we've crossed over
some threshold,
as if we've entered into
the other person's life,
as if we're welcomed there,

with them.

For when we are known by name,
we are no longer alone in the world.
There is another
who would recall later
whether we'd been present or not;
we're no longer anonymous
on our huge planet.
We have an identity.

That's why it's so striking to us
that the man answers
that his name is "Legion,"
meaning many,
like the 6000 members
of a Roman army legion.

The man doesn't have a name;
he has many, many names,
too many to count.

Who the man really is
has been lost
among all the disparate
clashing voices
raging inside him.

Today we know more,
though not all,
about the causes of disturbances
like that the man suffered.
Chemical imbalances,
traumas suffered,
genes inherited,
accidents or addictions
or neurological diseases –
all can render any of us
feeling split, hearing voices,
divided against ourselves,
riven like the man
who raced to see Jesus
the moment his boat hit dry land.

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Even those of us who feel relatively stable,

who do not suffer
from a medically diagnosable disease,
know something of being torn
in too many directions.
On our calendars are competing requirements –
to work and to family,
to aging parents and younger children,
to church and to home.
In this digital age,
our minds are stuffed
with divergent views.
There is always too much to read,
too few hours in the day,
too many stacks of things to sort,
too many choices to make.
We may look more presentable
than the wild man
on the outside:
we may wear decent clothes,
and return at night to a bed
rather than a tomb,
but inside
sometimes we too
can feel as if we are
juggling multiple ways
of defining ourselves
to the world.
We may not be possessed by demons
but we may feel handcuffed
by our preferred lifestyles,
or our titles,
or our need to keep up
certain appearances,
to seem to have it
all under control.
We also may sometimes feel
as if we've lost our true center,
confused about who we really are,
have lost our sense of direction,
our core priorities.
And then Jesus asks us,
“What is your name?”
He peers out of Luke's story this morning,
gently watching our faces:

“What is your name?”

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What would you say?

Of course you know your name –
the first, and middle and last surname
passed on by family,
gained or lost through divorce,
or chosen by you,
at some stage
to redefine yourself.

But beyond those initials
on the monogram,

what is your real identity?
Who are you, asks Jesus?
Who are you really, deep inside?
And who do you want to be,
your deepest self –
do you know?

When you feel most whole,
least fragmented,
then who are you?

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I'm conscious of the many dichotomies
in our lives

because in the three months
I've been with you,
I've had a lot to learn.

My goal is to be focused, above all,
on learning from you;

listening to your lives, with you;
building relationships
and in time, I hope,
gaining your trust.

That's my goal for this first year.
To listen and learn.

But then I see rushing towards us
all issues related to the Church School
and the financial support of our church –
both with numbers far too low
to be sustained.

I hear about all the ongoing matters

that make up daily life here –
our partner church in Transylvania,
how we manage weddings,
the needed hiring of staff,
an update of the computer system,
upkeep of our buildings,
our visitor program that burgeons
during these summer months.
And oh yes,
those twice weekly sermons
and pastoral needs.

So I'm very aware of the question
Jesus asks about our identities –
who am I called to be,
now, and here?

Among my identities as
mother, wife, friend,
senior minister of King's Chapel,
overseer of the Sunday School,
fundraiser, pastor....

So like the man running to Jesus,
I go to God in prayer.
And my sense,
when I also fall on my knees,
has been this.
I'm called to remember first
that I am a child of God.
That each of us is a child of God.
That's my first identity.
And yours. Our core identity.

For none of us can be
all things to all people.
But we can be God's child,
beloved by God,
that identity
as our ballast for everything else,
as the stable base
that keeps our boats afloat
in the swirling waters of life.

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Rituals, including our religious rituals
re-enacted here each week,

help remind of us of this core,
of who we are.
That's why each Sunday,
as Christ has taught us,
we pray the Lord's Prayer,
beginning with these two words: "Our Father."
It's a ritual that reminds us
of who and whose we are,
of the identity that we all share,
as children of God:
"Our Father."

Sometimes rituals also help us
discard false identities,
as the man possessed of demons
so graphically saw,
right before his eyes:
Jesus "send out" demons
from the man's life,
into the swine,
which drowned in the sea
below.

It can take that much clarity
before we are convinced
that a change has taken place
in our lives.

That's why, at our religious rituals called weddings,
parents walk their child down the aisle,
then hand the child off
to the new spouse,
and the parents sit down.
We parents need to take that long walk,
and then sit down,
to begin to comprehend
that we are no longer primary
in a son or daughter's life;
that the new spouse
will be the first of kin
called in an emergency.
The ritual is designed to help parents
"send off" their old identities
as the people primarily responsible
for their children's lives.
That role has ended.

Colleges also have been forced to invent new rituals for sending off parents
because of the recent "helicopter parent" phenomenon –
parents who throughout
their children's college careers
hover overhead
or rappel in
as if from a Black Hawk helicopter,
to save their children.

At the University where my kids went,
there is a very deliberate procession
out of the Chapel and down a walkway,
where parents are asked to turn right,
and only the newly matriculated students
are allowed to enter the hallowed gates
of the College Quad.

Parents, as they turn right and leave,
are handed tissues,
and escorted into a lavish reception
where they can moan to one another
over drinks.

So it is that there are times
when each of us will need to ask God
to help us "send away" parts of ourselves
that can no longer define us,
that perhaps have been enslaving us
as surely as the demoniac's Legion.
Could it be that we need God's help
to send away our false self-images
as being unworthy of love,
unable to sustain relationships,
the guilty one?

Might we need to send away
our self-definitions
based on success or physical stamina,
as heroically independent
and never needing help?

Anita Diamant,
local best selling author
of The Red Tent,
creates new Jewish rituals.
Whereas in the past,
a "mikveh" was a ritual bath
used primarily for women

to rid themselves of supposed impurities,

Diamant has reclaimed
 the tradition of ritual immersion
 in a beautiful, sunlit space in Newton
 where amidst special prayers,
 an individual can leave behind
 a former phase of life,
 and emerge fresh
 into a new beginning.

New rituals now mark healing,
 or an end to sorrow,
 or a joy celebrated.

A cancer patient who finishes her treatments
 washes off her status as sick person
 and is renamed cancer survivor.

Churches also are creating new rituals
 for these moments of transformation –
 Perhaps that lies ahead for us, all.

Because transformation –
 that was the point for Jesus, after all.
 When he sent out the demons
 from the man,
 it was to liberate the man.
 To free him
 from that which had enslaved him,
 had caused the man
 literally to be shackled.
 Jesus wanted to send off
 what got in the man's way
 of being his genuine self,
 Jesus wanted to restore him
 to someone confident
 of his own name and identity
 as God's child.
 God's own child,
once and now again
 and always.

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One last point.
 The worst part of Luke's story,
 for me,
 is the reaction of the townspeople.
 Rather than rejoice

in the transformation that occurred,
the townspeople were afraid.
When the locals saw the man
whom they'd shackled
now miraculously healed,
dressed and sitting with Jesus,
fully in his right mind,
they did **not** celebrate for him
or for themselves.
They did not gather around the man
to exclaim excitedly
how marvelous it was
to have him back again
among them,
to offer their homes to him
since he had none,
to hug his parents,
whose lost son had now been found.

No, when the man was transformed,
the people who saw it were afraid.
If Jesus could change that man,
who could he not change?
And what might be the outcome?
Would they lose more money,
as they'd lost their herd of swine?
Would Jesus change them
so they valued people
more than their possessions?

When Jesus enters the picture
and begins to change people,
everything becomes unpredictable –
relationships shift,
people who were at the bottom
of the social structure - rise up,
those whom everyone
had grown accustomed to leaving alone
and forgotten
need again to be taken seriously,
integrated back into the life of the town.

When one of us is freed,
a whole community is altered.
Freed from their old perceptions,
their old shackled identities, too.

That's why I asked
 our music director Heinrich Christensen
 and our soloist Zak Engle
 to offer us earlier this morning
 the Hymn to Freedom,
 written by Oscar Peterson,
 the great Canadian jazz pianist and composer.
 Originally created in the 1960s,
 during the Civil Rights movement,
 it's now sung by youth choirs
 throughout the world,
 a hymn that insists
 that we will be free
only when everyone
 is treated with dignity.

We will be free
 when each of us is free.

Liberation into our identities
 as precious children of God,
 is an awareness
 that is meant to spread –
 to catch fire,
 to transform one,
 then another,
 then this whole place,
 and then far beyond.

We will be free
 when the transformation of one man,
 long ridden with demons,
 is a cause of joy for all of us.
 When the newfound freedom of one
 does not scare us,
 because of the adjustments
 we will need to make

We will all be free
 when Healers like Jesus,
 who dignify every person
 are not begged to leave our land,
 because we are so afraid
 of the power unleashed
 by free women and men
 the world over.

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Today, there may be something
that weighs upon you,
or those you love.
There may be confusions or uncertainties
that plague you,
tugging you in different directions.
You feel fragmented and worn.

So Love comes to you, and gently asks,
"What is your name?"

Friends, with a power
that comes from beyond us,
and works through us,
we can send away
that which imprisons us.
You can be free!
Free to live and love.
In your right mind,
at the side of one
who calls you Beloved and
Friend.

"What is your name?" Jesus asks.
And we can say, with him, "I'm a child of God."

O God, grant us the courage and confidence
to know and live that promise,
for us and for all this aching world.
Amen.