

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
Luke 8:26-39
June 23, 2013

“...for many demons had entered him...”

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

When Jesus steps out of the boat “opposite Galilee,” (the Bible points this out to make sure we know that Jesus is in Gentile territory, that Jesus has crossed a boundary), he steps into a life-and-death drama. A Gerasene man runs to meet him. The man is “unclean” in every possible way. He is possessed by demons—he lives in the tombs among the dead, he is naked, unpredictable, irrational, violent and alone. He is so ill he is kept under guard, bound (we are told) with chains and shackles. But he is still so strong that he breaks the chains from time to time and runs into the wild.

This man is a Gentile and when the passage says that Jesus is in the land “opposite Galilee” that is significant in ways far more important than geography. Those two words, “opposite Galilee” signal to us that Jesus has intentionally stepped out to confront what is opposite life. This man is not living a real life...he is possessed by demonic forces. And yet, we understand, no one is beyond the reach of Jesus’ redeeming, healing, saving love.

This is the only account in the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus deliberately goes into Gentile territory. This boundary-crossing story has much to tell us about Jesus’ determination to confront demonic forces present in the world, his commitment to affirm and promote life, and his willingness to be with an unclean person, to become unclean himself to bring help, hope and healing whenever and wherever he can.

I have always loved and been moved by this somewhat bizarre story (why do the demons enter the swine, and then the swine kill themselves???). And whenever I read it, including studying this passage in divinity school, I have always agreed with the scholars and theologians who interpreted this story in the same way....it is always interpreted as the demonic man is possessed by a legion, meaning many, demonic forces.

Every scholar in every commentary that I have referred to has analyzed this story in the same way—all of them write about the “legion of demons” that inhabited this possessed man, and they reflect on Jesus’ power to confront this mass of demonic or evil forces.

But my perspective on this passage totally changed when, in our Adult Sunday School class that gathers before church, we saw a DVD in which theologian John Dominic Crossan discussed this story. Crossan says that when Jesus commands the unclean

spirit to come out of the man, and then asks, “What is your name?” we should believe that what the demonic possessed man says is literally true. Not figuratively true. Crossan does not believe the man is answering in metaphor. Crossan believes the demonic forces, the unclean spirit, is responding accurately and truthfully when asked, “What is your name?”

The demonic force, speaking through the man, says, “Legion.”

Crossan invites us to consider that it was the militarism of Jesus’ time, the occupation of the ancient world by the Roman Empire, and the oppression of the people by an ever-present legion of soldiers that had truly made this man crazy.

Pause for a moment and reflect on that interpretation.

Countless scholars have written about this passage saying in agreement that when the demonic spirit says its name is “Legion” the unclean spirit means there are legions or many demons possessing the man.

Crossan disputes that. And I agree with him.

The demon says “Legion” and the demon might be right.

In Jesus’ time, it was the ever-present, overpowering Roman army that influenced every aspect of daily life for peasants. It was the occupation by the Roman army that people lived with and under that affected their lives hour by hour. It was the militarism that dominated their world, robbed them of their culture, taxed them into poverty, and manipulated their existence—it was the ever-present legion of Roman soldiers—that made this man crazy. It was war and violence that made this man insane. The demons were right when they said, “Legion.” They meant “Legion.” The army...the ever-present violence and the ever-present threat of violence.

This supposedly crazy man in the country of the Gerasenes had absorbed all the horrors of war, violence, unbridled militarism and had been undone by it. His insanity is actually a very sane response into an insane system that elevates the lust for power, the bloated military, the disregard for life, and the trampling of human rights that are all part of a war machine. Other than Jesus himself, the demonic man is probably the most sane character in this story. He seems to have an appropriate response to the overpowering presence of fear, violence and brutality all around him.

When the man said “Legion” he meant “Legion.” He is saying: the Legion, the army, that terrifying presence that permeates every aspect of my life, THAT is what made me insane.

And so what I take from this story, given the **Crossan** interpretation, is that militarism, in all its forms, in all its monstrous forms, is central to the problems in our lives and in our world.

Jesus was a man of peace. In the midst of the imperial occupation of his land, in the face of the powerful and huge Roman army, and in the presence of a dominating, war-

loving, conqueror/emperor Julius Cesar, Jesus preached about peace and compassion, love and nonviolence.

Jesus was so committed to nonviolence he did not even want his followers to carry a staff (like a crook or a cane) to ward off bandits they might meet on the road. Jesus was so nonviolent that he talked about turning the other cheek when hit rather than hit back. Jesus was so nonviolent that he preached about loving and praying for your enemies and those who persecute you. Do not do them harm. Do not even wish them harm. Pray for their souls. Jesus was so nonviolent that he went to his death with dignity and honor, never striking back, never even defending himself. And he managed to pray, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Jesus was so nonviolent.

In the face of profound violence and the threat of violence, Jesus stood for peace, preached compassion, and paid with his life. Never ever ever believe that Jesus was murdered by the Roman army because he was gentle Jesus meek and mild. Jesus was sentenced to capital punishment, state-sponsored execution because he was a threat to the Roman occupation...he was an insurgent, a radical, a peace activist, a revolutionary preaching peace in an occupied land. He was anti-imperial in an empire. He was committed to nonviolence and because of that, he was dangerous.

Jesus commanded the unclear spirit to come out of the man...

Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?"

He said, "Legion."

Violence and war make us crazy. Peace and compassion make us well.

The man was filled with demonic spirits and evil forces because he was filled with the awareness of violence and the brutality of war.

Augustine once wrote, "Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself."

And that brings us to this Church.

War and militarism are not something outside of us either. They are part of our lives, part of our country, part of our world. The only reason they have not made us as crazy as the man filled with demons in the country of Gerasene is that we live in a state of denial. We push aside the reality of ongoing unbridled militarism, we pretend we don't live in a modern-day empire, we narrow our focus to our own little peaceful Valley and our beautiful, rural life.

But militarism is the permanent stamp on our lives as well.

51 cents out of every tax dollar we pay to the US government goes to pay for current wars and the debt on past wars. That leaves 49 cents out of every tax dollar to pay for everything else—everything else the government is supposed to support and fund.

And so our schools are repeatedly cutting teachers, our roads and bridges are in disrepair, our day care centers are under-funded, our health care system is in shambles, and our planet is dying. Our communities do not have the basic social, medical, educational structures to meet human needs.

To be faithful to Jesus, the one we seek to follow, we must be nonviolent activists who speak, vigil, sing, pray, march and carry on wildly for peace. To be true followers of Jesus, we must love, embrace and work for peace with justice.

To be the church—the church worthy of calling itself a descendant of those radical early Christian communities—we must stand against war and violence. We must ask questions, take risks, be visible, dissent, oppose, resist, and show courage.

What other institution in society today can ask hard questions about the militarism of our society if not the church?

In his book The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus, Robin Meyers writes,

Our marching orders are not the nation's marching orders.

In the rush to each new war, if the church does not throw itself across the tracks, then who will? Because war is big business and corporations are now more powerful than governments, what other nonprofit but the church (with millions of members every week) can possibly make a dent in the business of war?

Just as the Black Church protected the civil rights movement as a last refuge, the church should be the last refuge of the antiwar movement.

The church.

That's us. Jesus-followers all banded together to act like and be like and live like the one we love and emulate.

And so we must be the justice-seeking, peace-loving church that our Peace and Justice committee has proposed that we become. They have challenged us to take a year study and discuss what it mean to embrace justice—what it feels like and looks like and how it can change the world.

And to study and discuss peace—what IT feels like and looks like and how it can change the world.

And then, the Peace and Justice Committee has said, we can, after a long and thoughtful process, boldly and powerfully identify as and publicly announce that we are A JUSTICE DOING AND PEACE SEEKING COMMUNITY OF FAITH.

Once we take that step, claim that label, and take on that mantle we can say, watch out. There's no stopping us now.

We intend to be as subversive, counter-cultural and radical and the one we seek to follow. Watch out.

Jesus was dangerous and so are we. We are nonviolent warriors for justice and peace and there is power in our vision, our faith, our commitment, our intentions our actions.

My beloved sisters and brothers, we are the church of Jesus of Nazareth. Because we love and follow him, we must continue today what he began so long ago.

Jesus was radical. And the early Christian church was radical. But slowly, over the centuries since his death, the church has stopped challenging the status quo and begun instead to defend it. But we are Jesus followers.

We are called to CHALLENGE the status quo, not defend it.

And challenging the status quo means challenging militarism—in all its forms. In all its disguises. With all its far-reaching destructive powers.

I am proud that this congregation—this progressive, vision-holding, powerful Hilltown congregation in Western Mass—has chosen to do the prayerful, thoughtful work to discern what it really means to be a justice doing, peace seeking community of faith.

I am proud to engage in that work with you.

I am proud to investigate and learn, to recommend changes and propose strategies. I am eager to publicly announce, sometime in the future, that we are truly a justice doing, peace seeking community of faith.

I think we are equal to this task, and I think it will change us.

I believe that we can and will make a big difference in communities far beyond these walls.

And I also think....that for a while....when I hear that schools in Westfield have told children to bring sweaters to school in the winter because they cannot turn up the heat, and teachers in Springfield are buying paper, chalk and even toilet paper for their schools out of their own money, and nurses are on strike because they are severely underpaid, and day care providers have to moonlight, holding a second job, just to make ends meet...

I think that when I hear these things and I look upset, anxious and I act a little crazy, and someone notices and asks me...

“Andrea, what is wrong with you?”

I might just say, “Legion.”

Amen.

