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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year C: Luke 8:26-39

If you don't find today's Gospel text to be even the slightest bit bizarre or frightening, you might want to take a second look at it! As a preacher, I feel as if I can really hit my stride when the texts center on subjects like love and forgiveness, but when things take a sharp turn toward the esoteric (like today), I'd sooner change the subject.

We are all children of a scientific age, and we, as a society, have benefited tremendously from advances in medicine and psychiatric medicine, in particular. No longer do we blame bizarre behavior on demonic possession; instead, we turn to diagnoses of conditions such as paranoid schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Even if you wanted to enlist the services of one of the Catholic Church's exorcists, it must first be proven that whatever you're trying to "cast out" cannot be treated with modern medicine.

Many years ago, a Vatican exorcist commented that the criteria for his services were thorough and numerous. He matter-of-factly suggested that possessed persons had better be levitating fifteen feet off the ground and speaking a language they'd never learned before he would consider performing an exorcism!

But then we look into the Scriptures and it seems like demons and exorcisms are all over the place. What has happened since then? Do we have fewer demons to cast out these days?

I think not.

It would be more accurate to say that we just don't see things the same way as people did two thousand years ago. If any of you heard me talking about starting an exorcism ministry and if I wanted you to be the first participants in it, I think you would be a little bit concerned...and rightly so. From your average clergyperson's perspective, there are simply too many opportunities for manipulation and abuse of the pastoral office when one ventures into such things.

And yet, I tread on shaky ground when I admit to my own skepticism on the matter of demons and exorcisms; one might easily conclude that I "don't believe in the Bible" because I maintain that modern psychiatry has given us better ways to treat conditions that were once labeled as demonic possession. Without any evidence of either true demonic possession or the efficacy of an exorcist's ministry, I will remain cautious when approaching these matters.

As a person in recovery, I also bristle a bit when people use language like "demon rum," as I don't believe that liquor, wine, or beer is inherently evil, and, if recovery is an exorcism of sorts, it is an exorcism of the alcoholic or addict himself, usually by means of a twelve-step program. But there are no designated exorcists involved.

As far as the biblical witness goes, I can only know as much as the text tells me. Today, we hear of a man "who had demons" (Luke 8:27). How we might describe this man's condition in a modern context really isn't relevant now. And, for heaven's sake, let's get all the Hollywood images of demonic possession out of our heads at this time, too. (Thank you, Linda Blair!)

The demons had ruined the man's life. Parenthetically, the text notes, "For many times [the demon] 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" (Luke 8:29b). It was a bitter and agonizing existence, and the only person who could offer this man any relief was Jesus.

But not without the story getting really weird...

Actually, it deserves to be heard again; let's start at verse 32: "Now there on a 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" (Luke 8:32-33).

Pork wouldn't have been a particularly valuable commodity in a region inhabited by Jews; I just hope that the swine didn't belong to some poor pig farmer who relied on them for his livelihood! (We could hope that, on the contrary, he was independently wealthy...) Actually, in a Jewish context, swine would be considered unclean, so an unclean spirit going into an unclean animal is quite appropriate.

Now look at how everything turns out. While the casting out of the demon could give the story the requisite happy ending, there's something fishy about the people's reaction. The text says, "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!" (Luke 8:35, emphasis mine).

Did the people of that region find it all just as bizarre as I did? Demons and pigs drowning in a lake doesn't sound like a very pleasant afternoon to me, and it appears as if I'm not alone! While they may not have seen everything in the goriest of detail, they had seen enough to leave them rattled, so there's definitely more going on here than what meets the eye. Was it the shock of seeing a man whom they'd figured would be possessed forever suddenly appear perfectly fine? Was it the simple fact of knowing that there was someone in their midst so powerful that he could cast out demons? Was this the sort of subject matter that made them feel uncomfortable?

We'll never know the answer to all those questions completely, but they point to a number of possibilities. There is a tendency for folks like you and me to shy away from things that are so "dark" and "heavy." Perhaps this was the case way back when this story took place, too. It's always been easier to slap a nice, thick coat of denial onto some of the darker sides of human existence, because facing them is extremely fear-inducing.

And yet, I still raise my initial concern -- that we acknowledge first the advances in medicine that actually treat conditions once thought to be the effects of demonic possession. We would actually be in a greater state of denial if we were going around performing exorcisms left and right instead of seeking the help of actual, medically-trained professionals.

Could we also not argue that Jesus' ministry of healing in both body and mind continues through the work of physicians, mental health workers, and the like? I can't see why not! And, in thinking about the differences between today and when this story took place, we, indeed, recognize the changes that have oc-

curred, because we wouldn't look to exorcism as a first-line treatment. At the same time, though, we can also acknowledge the reality that takes place in both modern and ancient treatments.

That's as simple as the Yogi Berra-esque statement, "If it works, it works!"

Our text has an intriguing conclusion. It appears as if Jesus wasn't looking for more hangers-on. Despite repeated pleas from the man to remain with him, Jesus whisks him away with the words, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you" (Luke 8:39a). Today, we clergy would applaud Jesus for maintaining good professional boundaries! But I think there's something much deeper going on here; indeed, it's the paradigm for anyone who receives a great gift from the Lord. It's to tell others about that gift. You have been forgiven, healed, renewed, reborn, and restored by Jesus, perhaps in ways you're not even aware of! And yet, when we are called upon to declare how much God has done for us, we have a tendency to clam up.

Granted, no one likes windy, sanctimonious evangelists. No one likes the zealot whose personal relationship with Christ has become a public relationship with Christ. And no one likes to listen to the person whose religion has begun to resemble an addiction. But when we make the leap from interpreting the Gospel to applying the Gospel, we can't forget to share it with others. And that can be as simple as inviting someone to worship, or providing encouragement to someone who feels a bit beat down, or offering to pray for a particular person or concern in a time of need. In doing any of these things, you're declaring how much God has done for you!

And lastly, remember that, regardless of the method of treatment, Jesus is al-

ways the Chief Healer. I don't think that because we're not casting out demons much anymore we're also not doing the Lord's work anymore. On the contrary, we know plainly that times and treatments have changed, and sometimes, we should be happy we're not back in those fabled "good ol' days," because often they weren't so good. Another glance at today's Gospel text would be an excellent reminder of that...

Indeed, the healing work of Jesus continues because he is the Chief Healer, and along with that, lots and lots of people have used their God-given gifts to make that healing more effective and less painful. To say that the Chief Healer has dropped out of the picture because of modern medicine is just plain wrong. He is still working through the hearts, hands, voices, and minds of some of his brightest and most devoted servants.

And for that, we say, "Thanks be to God!"

Amen.