

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 18-19, 2016
Luke 8:26-39

“Freedom”

In just two weeks' time, we will be celebrating the Fourth of July with parades and fireworks, concerts and speeches, barbeques and gatherings with family and friends. All of these plans will proceed in spite of the terrible massacre that took place in Orlando last weekend, even as we continue to grapple with the reality of such senseless violence. The Fourth of July holiday celebrates the freedom that we know and love in this country; that is so much a part of who we are as a people. We have been blessed with freedom that countless other people in other parts of the world can only imagine. As the old phrase puts it, “Freedom is not free,” meaning that others have paid a heavy price – perhaps even their very lives – for the freedom which we frequently take for granted. I thought of this when I was in Iowa for my niece's wedding last weekend. My siblings and I were looking through a box of old family photos and mementos, among which was the Gold Star citation for my mother's brother who was killed in action during World War II in North Africa. Freedom is what today's Gospel lesson is about – freedom from oppression and tyranny, not in a political sense but in a spiritual sense. Jesus gives freedom to the Gerasene man who was possessed by demons, and in so doing, Jesus gives hope to all who are oppressed and shackled by forces that are bent on their destruction. Jesus alone can give this freedom because Jesus alone is this freedom. This is what we celebrate and give thanks for this day as we focus on what that Gospel lesson means for our own lives today under the theme, “Freedom.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

There is a strange fascination that our culture seems to have with demon possession. Shows on cable TV and movies focus on this topic as though this were some sort of entertainment. A word of caution is necessary: be very careful what you are getting into here. A door can be opened into a very dark place where you are no longer in control; a place of oppression and tyranny that truly is bent on your destruction. Such was the case with the unnamed Gerasene man. We do not even know his name, but his story is incredibly powerful. How did he come to find himself in such a horrible state of being? Did he literally sell his soul to the devil? Or did all of this take place gradually, sort of like the frog in the kettle, as the man sunk deeper and deeper into a black hole? Scripture does not reveal this to us, and that is probably just as well. Everything about the man degenerated into something like a wild animal: his appearance, his behavior, his strength, his speech. People tried to intervene, but it did no good. He was out of control, or more accurately, was *under* control by forces that had taken over his very life. He abandoned home and family, making his home among the dead – graves and tombs; living among corpses and bones. He was unclean and filthy, and no longer even wore clothes. To ensure their safety, local citizens attempted to bind him in chains and shackles, but they had no idea of the power he possessed; or rather, of the power that possessed him. With super-human strength, he broke off the chains and shackles, and was compelled to run back into the wilderness to do the bidding of that to which he was a slave. The person his family and friends knew no longer existed. Something else inhabited his body, his mind, his spirit – his very being. From a human perspective, it looked as though there was no hope for this individual, but that he was completely lost.

Then Jesus came. As soon as He stepped out of that boat, the Gerasene man was there. And then a great guttural shriek burst forth from his mouth: **“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”** (Luke 8:28). Whatever power that controlled the man realized that here, standing before him, was another Power far greater than itself. It *had* to submit to him; it *had* to obey him. And for the first time in a very long time, there was a faint glimmer of hope. Jesus asked, **“What is your name?”** but Jesus wasn't asking the man himself but the evil that inhabited and controlled him. The voice responded, **“Legion.”** Legion: 4000 to 6000 soldiers comprised a legion in the Roman army. Notice how things shift

from the first person (“What have you to do with *me*, Jesus, Son of the Most High God”) to the third person: **“And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss”** (Luke 8:31) – that place reserved for the devil and his angels. The voices of that legion of demons beg for mercy! These evil forces that had dominated and exerted such power over the Gerasene man’s life are now powerless before the Son of Man! They begged him not to send them back to their prison, the abyss. They pleaded with him to send them instead into a large herd of pigs there by the sea, and that is what Jesus did. And at last, that Gerasene man was free – not by anything he did, but through what Jesus did for him. And after entering that herd of pigs, they immediately rushed down to the sea and were drowned. And that is when everyone started to freak out. The herdsman ran into town and told everybody what had happened, and then a big crowd came out to see all of this: the bodies of the pigs floating out there on the water as well as the crazy man now in his right mind. Nobody could believe it.

It was too much for people to take in. They couldn’t handle it, and so they asked Jesus to leave. If He could do something as powerful as this, there was no telling what He was capable of doing. As we are told: **“for they were seized with great fear”** (Luke 8:37). But not the Gerasene man! He knew that the power which Jesus possessed was used for good, not for evil, and so he wanted to go with Jesus and be with him wherever he might go. The fear which once controlled his life was now taken over by joy and thanksgiving. His life had been restored. How could he not turn his life over to the One who had saved him? But Jesus refused his request, and instead sent him back to those who knew him best; to the people in his own community who knew him before, during, and after all of this. Jesus instructed him: **“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you”** (Luke 8:39). Can you imagine the power of this man’s testimony? How many lives were turned to Jesus because of what Jesus had done for him? This side of heaven, we will never know. What we do know is that the man did exactly as Jesus instructed him: **“And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him”** (Luke 8:39).

Maybe you are struggling with forces in your own life that are bent on your destruction. These are just as real today as they were in Jesus’ day. Maybe you feel powerless over them, and that they – not you – are controlling your life. If Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, could set the Gerasene man free, there is hope for you and for everyone who feels trapped and caught in a downward death spiral. This miracle of deliverance is through Jesus alone, whom Paul tells us in today’s Epistle lesson: **“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”** (Galatians 4:5). We have been redeemed and set free through life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of the Most High God. If Jesus could do what he did for the Gerasene man, just imagine what he can do for you, so that we, too, might proclaim how much Jesus has done for us. Amen.