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June 23, 2019
Second Sunday after Pentecost

Demons

In today's Gospel, Luke takes us to the country of the Gerasenes, on the Golan Heights or northwest side of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus meets a "man who had demons." I don't think we believe much in demons these days. Demons were an old religious explanation of something bad that people didn't understand. In Jesus' time, mental illness was blamed on demons that were living inside of and controlling someone – in effect, imprisoning that person.

In order to heal a person of possession, the healer had to have power -- not only to name the demon, but power to cast him out of the person's life. Jesus does this for the man, he commands the demons to leave the man and gives them permission to enter a herd of pigs, who promptly drown themselves. It's interesting that Jesus forces the demons out of the man into pigs. In Jesus' day, pigs were considered 'unclean.' What better place for Jesus to put the demons than an animal that's already unclean? But I guess the pigs didn't care much for the demons either...

Jesus makes the man whole again. But the people in the surrounding area ask Jesus to leave, because they're afraid of someone who has such great power. Jesus leaves, but not before he instructs the healed man to "declare how much God has done for you."

Each of us, in some way, either has, or has had, something in common with the man who was possessed by demons. And I'm not just talking about mental illness – schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, or a little bit of OCD. There are lots of other demons -- big demons and little demons, obvious demons and hidden demons. Some of the harmful and obvious demons that can imprison us are drugs, gambling, or alcohol (think about the old phrase "demon rum")..

There are what I'll call the "demons of wanting too much" -- power, prestige, narcissism, materialism, even physical exercise and risk-taking (think about that endorphin or adrenalin rush). There are what I'll call "demons of having too little" – poor self-image, self-doubt or constant self-sacrifice. There are "self-soothing demons" like overeating or shopping (think about the phrase "shop-aholic").

And now, in the 21st century, there are new demons. Excessive use of technology (some call it addiction) can cause us to isolate ourselves and escape from reality. You know what's coming -- computer gaming, binge-watching TV, "living" on social media like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

We may or may not be aware of our demons. We may or may not admit that we have them. We may let them take control of us, or we may fight daily to control them. Sometimes we're successful, sometimes we're not.

The Gerasenes are afraid of the man with the demons, and "bind him with chains and shackles" whenever they can catch him. But Jesus deals with him without flinching—and provides exactly the help he needs.

It takes courage to admit to our demons. As terrible as they might be, as much harm as they might cause, we are reluctant to name them, face them and let them go. We've lived with them, and they're familiar to us. We're afraid to change. We're afraid of what it will take to change.

On Thursday morning I was reading Psalm 88, and I realized that David was praying about his own demons in this psalm. His demons made him feel like he was cast out of society, imprisoned and forsaken, even by God. Here's what he says:

"O LORD, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you.

May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.

For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave.

I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like a man without strength.

I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.

You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Selah

You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape..."

God helped David get rid of his demons, and God helped me escape from mine too. I remember the night, about five years ago, when I told Brad that I had become an alcoholic. It

was a scary thing to admit – to myself and to him. It meant that I had only two choices: to continue drinking and accept the consequences, or to do something about it.

I chose to do something. I checked myself into Father Martin's rehabilitation center for 30 days. That was where I sought God's help and where I received it, with the help of an elderly priest. He told me to take paper and pen and go off by myself and write down as much as I could to describe the God that I WANTED to worship. I did this for at least two hours, maybe three. When I brought it back to him, he said, "This is YOUR God. Don't ever let anyone take Him away from you." I never will.

Strengthened by God, we can face great danger with great courage. Luke's story tells us that we don't have to struggle with our demons alone. God is there to give us courage, to help us make it through the day and shake loose the demons. He wants to give us the power to name, confront and cast out the demons that control us.

First, in order to get rid of our demons, we have to name them - very much like I have to say, "My name is June and I'm an alcoholic." We need to say it loud and clear, not under our voices so no one can hear. If we proclaim the demon, then it begins to have less power over us.

Second, we need to "make amends" – to confess and apologize for any harm we have done to others, and also to ourselves. We absolutely MUST forgive ourselves. We can't expect others to forgive us if we can't forgive ourselves. We can proclaim the demon, but until we release its grip on us by forgiving and being forgiven, it still has its claws in us

Third, we need to trust that God will help us. He sent His Son to die for us. He loves each one of us, warts and all, and he wants to help us to be the very best we can be. We are loved by the sheer GRACE of God. . . no matter who we are, or what demons we're imprisoned by.

Lastly, just as Jesus sent the man back home to tell everyone what God had done for him, we have to be messengers of the good news, just as I'm doing today, here with you. We do it because we know what a blessing it is to be released, and we need to help others with their struggles.

Jesus can still the storm, walk on water, raise the dead and liberate the imprisoned from their demons. We, when we are healed, hold the keys that can bring others the healing that

they need. Then they can become the people God created them to be, and we can also. Then the forces of evil are destroyed.

The "still small voice" of God declares that we are loved, chosen and accepted in spite of our demons. We were created by God in His own image; we are His beloved. He sent his Son to die for us so we would understand how much we are loved. What greater proof could we possibly need? **AMEN.**