

sermon-6/20/10 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Modern Demons”  
Luke 8:26-39

The story of the Garasene demoniac requires some work for modern day readers. Most of us are not experienced with demons. Perhaps some have seen movies about demon possession like “The Exorcist” or other more recent horror films, but I suspect few of us have ever encountered a demoniac. Those who come at things from a scientific perspective may even scoff at the whole notion of demons. Others are just uncomfortable even thinking about such things.

Then there is the issue of fairness. How fair was it for those poor pig herders to lose their entire herd? When the gospel of Mark tells this story we learn there were about 2,000 pigs that drowned in the sea. That represents a lot of money! When Jesus allows the demons to enter the pigs and they rush into the sea we wonder what Luke thought about that. Jesus does not seem to feel too bad. Perhaps since pigs were seen as unclean by Jews, Luke hoped his early readers would find this ironic, if not funny. But, when we read it, it just feels unfair.

Then there is the image of the demoniac himself. We are given a picture of this naked, wild man living in a cemetery (Not seminary as I inadvertently said on Sunday!) rushing out to meet Jesus by yelling at him. That is not a very inviting image to confront on a nice Sunday morning, especially on Father’s Day. I don’t know about you, but whenever I am in the city and encounter someone who is unkempt and smelly (I rarely see a naked man!) I try to avoid them, looking away and walking quickly. But here we are in worship and the scriptures make us face such an uncomfortable person.

Given all that, there is an important message embedded in this strange story. We will need to broaden our understanding of what constitutes demonic for this text to be relevant to our modern situation.

Let’s think about the demonic as all those forces in the modern world that lead away from life in all its fullness, and instead, lead to death and brokenness. I am referring to brokenness in terms of relationships or communities. While these forces can be isolated in individuals, they are far more destructive when they take over a group of people, or even a society. Germany experienced such a force when the Nazis came to power in the last century. We have seen the horrific consequences of demonic forces in Rwanda, South Africa, the Taliban in Afghanistan, to name a few.

I would like to suggest our own country is not immune from demonic forces that wreak havoc among us. Perhaps the most relevant demonic force in our time is greed. Greed can be terribly destructive as it takes on a life of its own and makes people do horrible things.

We have seen it in some of our financial institutions making irresponsible mortgage loans, gambling with other people’s money to make huge profits. We have seen it most

recently with BP and the oil spill in the Gulf. We have watched in horror as innocent birds struggle to breathe while covered in an oily goo. Pristine beaches have been despoiled. Those who depend on fishing and harvesting shell fish in the Gulf for their livelihood have seen their source of income disappear. All of this makes the loss of 2,000 pigs in Luke's story seem like peanuts.

Greed has taken over people causing them to cut corners on safety or distort the truth to make a profit. These are not bad people. They are like you and me. While they are not living in the tombs naked and wild, their naked greed is on display for all to see.

Behind the demon of greed infecting BP is a more difficult problem: our huge dependency on oil to sustain our lifestyle here in the United States. It may not be totally accurate to call that dependency a demon, but it sure acts like a demon in its consequences. It is destroying our environment and it is leading to wars to protect our access to more oil.

The only way to exorcize this demon is to change our habits and way of life. That will not be easy. It is here where our reality begins to mirror the text in Luke. When the pigs were destroyed as a consequence of healing the demoniac, look at that man's neighbors. See how they responded.

When they came saw him sitting at Jesus' feet in his right mind, they did not express any joy. In fact, they tell Jesus to leave. Why? Maybe it has something to do with the fact that when Jesus starts exorcizing demons there are financial implications. Things change when demons are defeated and life does not go back to normal. Sometimes pocket books are affected.

So, too, if we are to get off our dependency on oil it will cause some sacrifices, some of them financial, that will not be easy. When some in the past have urged this country to spend money pursuing other sources of energy to save the environment many have resisted. Like the neighbors in our text urging Jesus to leave, we have told those who suggest changes to go away. We don't want to hear it.

Sometimes the issue just seems too big to take on. Some may want to change, but don't know how or think they can't afford to change their gas guzzling car for a more expensive hybrid.

It is here where an article last Monday in the Seattle Times is helpful. It was written by columnist David Sirota. David says the disaster in the Gulf, what he calls "this ecological holocaust," is not just the fault of BP and the drilling companies. He says we need to look in the mirror to see our own culpability in this mess. But, instead of just pointing fingers, Sirota gives some very helpful advice, things we can all do to lessen our oil dependence.

He says it has been estimated that Americans "use 100 billion plastic shopping bags each year, which are made from an estimated 12 million barrels of oil. Likewise, the Pacific

Institute reports that the equivalent of 17 million barrels of oil are used to produce plastic water bottles.” He suggests if we made the sacrifice, and it is hardly a painful sacrifice, to stop using plastic bags and buying water in plastic bottles, we could make a meaningful symbolic dent in our dependence on oil.

He then gives another example that may cut closer to home. He says we can make a difference by reducing our consumption of animal flesh. “Today, the average American eats 200 pounds of meat annually, an increase of 50 pounds per person from 50 years ago, according to The New York Times. . . . Quoting Cornell University researchers, Time magazine reports that producing animal protein requires eight times as much fossil fuel as producing a comparable amount of plant protein.

He goes on to say that “cutting meat consumption by just 20 percent-say, going meatless two days a week-is equal to switching from a standard sedan to a hybrid” in terms of energy use. That is eye-opening!

I quote his article not to promote any specific action, but to give examples of little personal sacrifices that can make a huge difference on a societal level. If we are going to make any headway confronting the demons of greed, over consumption of fossil fuels, and protecting our way of life even if it causes environmental damage, it will take some sacrifices. It may even have financial implications.

This should be second nature for Christians. We are disciples of a man who was willing to sacrifice even his life to change the way we look at God and justice. As Christians we have a huge responsibility to be good stewards of God’s creation.

It used to be that our leaders urged citizens to make sacrifices for the common good. That was certainly true during World War II. Not anymore. It is about time that changes. As our text makes clear, fighting demons, whether personal or societal, comes with a cost. May we not act like the townspeople in Luke 8 who asked Jesus to leave because his healing work impacted their finances. May we do our part in exorcizing the demons of greed, over consumption and oil dependency in our own lives, and in our society.  
Amen