

June 19, 2006

## WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH US ???

Matthew 8:29-34

After the story of how Jesus calmed the outward storm on the sea, there comes a story of how Jesus calmed the inward storm within two men. The way the wind was raging upon the water, there was also something terrible raging within the men who spent their time in the graveyard.

Today the notion of demon-possession is often relegated to the realm of superstition. But there has been a tremendous surge in the belief that angels surely exist, doing all sorts of anonymous good and watching over people. So the idea that an evil counterpart might exist could be, but is seldom used to explain the prevalence of evil. Could it be possible that unseen beings with evil intent are lurking nearby, waiting to grab ahold of us and lead us astray? Could it be possible that distorted ideas and twisted thoughts are actually the result of some kind of demonic attack? How else would it be possible, for example, for a small resentment to blossom into a gigantic hate? How else would it be possible for a taste of alcohol to lead to an all-out addiction? How else would it be possible for religion to become so radical that it turns its disciples into suicide bombers, hate-mongers, and murderers?

As much as psychology has sorted out the working of the mind, there are still many things that cannot be explained by science. Where science ends, either superstition or confusion or religion takes over. Here were two men who were deemed so completely dangerous that people could not pass that way, who, according to Luke's version of this story in His 8<sup>th</sup> Chapter (which tells of just one man), lived among the tombs. Two men who were possessed would easily have teamed up, enabling each other to perpetuate their schizophrenia. Demons, it seems logical, would naturally do such a thing. Just as much as misery loves company, so too, would people with distorted thoughts and twisted minds.

Think of how a professional wrestler gets his name. Either they choose a style for their behavior and then a name that fits it, or, they choose a name and then fulfill it with a style. In Luke, the man was called *Legion*, perhaps because he seemed to gain the strength of thousands when he was acting out, or, reacting to whatever it was that provoked him (which might even have been an act of kindness, or, as with Christ, the presence of kindness; or, was it true power, or, faith, or even sanity?) Perhaps he had the name *Legion* because, as with the disease of schizophrenia, multiple personalities can seem to exist together within one individual. And he had so many distorted ways of behaving that it seemed as if there were thousands of personalities raging within him, dividing his mind, twisting his thoughts, and beckoning his will. Now imagine this happening to two men.

However he behaved, somewhere along the line, perhaps early in his life, this man gave over control to demonic thoughts. It could have begun with hatred toward an abuser, or, resentment toward someone who rejected him. But once he had given over a little control, there were more and more demons that began pulling at him, gradually robbing him of any control at all, and...taking over.

Now, lest we think that demons are waiting around to randomly attack whoever they can, realize that possession is an issue of control. I don't believe that demon possession is possible without our relinquishing control to the demon. Look closely at what Paul says in Romans 7:15-8:1 – *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the Law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells*

*within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now, if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it but sin that dwells within me... So I find it a law that, when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the Law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the Law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the laws of sin. There is therefore, now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!* I don't think Paul is talking about demon-possession so much as he is reflecting on the sin-nature in all fallen human beings.

It is sin working in us that makes the relinquishment of our will to the demonic possible. But... good news... Grace is at work in us too. First, through what is called **Prevenient Grace**, through our conscience. And then, through **Convincing Grace**, then, **Justifying Grace**, and finally, **Sanctifying Grace**. But the human conscience, the innate ability to distinguish between right from wrong, prevents, or, should prevent us from choosing what is wrong. And when we fail to let our conscience be our guides, there is a collective conscience, or, a community of the *conscientious*, that works as a checks-and-balance for our behavior. Without any checks and balances there would be anarchy. Spiritual and moral anarchy!

Now, in this story, and in the story in Luke, there is a very obvious clue that the collective conscience of this community of Gadara was distorted. After all, these men were still alive! For whatever reason, they never killed them. They kept them alive. Anyone who would have posed a serious a threat could very likely have been either banished completely, or, stoned to death, or, ... crucified! Romans crucified dangerous people without a second thought. The people of Gadara let these men live on the fringe of their community... in the tombs. You can almost imagine that they might have been coaxed out by young revelers or rowdies from time to time just so they could taunt them and further drive them into insanity. I believe in this possibility because of their fear and rejection of Jesus who healed the men. The fact of the matter is that the mental health of our social surroundings is reflected in the mental health of its individuals.

The Gadarenes seemed to want to keep these men around. It sort of reminds me of a story about an early missionary to the South Pacific Islands...He became a regular part of their full-moon ceremony. Maybe these demoniacs had become a part of the weird life of the Gadarenes.

The story in Luke tells of how the man nicknamed Legion "begged that he might be with Jesus; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him!" Luke 8:39-39) Nothing works for Christ like the message of a changed life! The man named Legion had been terribly tormented within, but he ended up in his right mind. When Christ came into his life, he begged Jesus not to torment him (likewise the two demoniacs in Matthew). "*What do You want with us, Son of God?*" Sometimes, being cured can be a difficult process.

We cannot really change until we face what's wrong in our lives. And doing so can be a painful, tormenting process. We have to, first, admit that we have a problem though. In the meantime, we get accustomed to our flaws. I can't tell you how often people have used the excuse, "That's just the way I am!" Rather than following the high road and striving for perfection, we often choose the low road

because we don't want to work so hard, or,... because we fear change! We think: "Jesus will accept me just as I am!" But... Jesus will never leave you the same!

It seems the demons within these men knew something was going to happen to them: "*Have You come here to torment us before the time?*" (Matthew 8:29) Perhaps the time is when Satan is defeated in Revelation 20:1-3, and thrown into the pit for a thousand years. In Luke, *Legion* begs Jesus *not to order them to go back into the abyss!* (Luke 8:31) They wanted to be sent into the herd of swine nearby. So Jesus said, "Go!" Now it seems that the pigs would rather die than be possessed by demons, so, they all at once rushed over the cliff into the sea and drowned. Do pigs have more sense than people when it comes to twisted, distorted thoughts invading their minds? Maybe!

The people of the town reacted to the swine-herders' testimony by asking Jesus to leave. They were more afraid of Him, apparently, than they were of the demoniacs! Remember, it is a sick community! So... Jesus leaves. Jesus will not persist where He is not welcomed. Jesus, the Son of God, is just too much for some people. But...the more dramatic the change in someone's life, the more we can realize how awesome God is!

What, in your life, would you want Jesus to change? If you could be freed of just one thing, what would it be? Today, many people suffer more from a legion of things that possess their *time* than their spirits. But...how is that different...if it still prevents us from being in control? Why do we let those things take so much control, anyway?