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“The Blame Game”

Luke 8:26-39

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Our scripture reading comes to us from the gospel of Luke. Prior to our selected passage for today, Jesus and the disciples got into a boat and decided to head across to the other side of the lake. The boat rocked back and forth, back and forth, until it rocked Jesus to sleep. While he was sleeping, a storm swept down, and the disciples were in danger. They woke Jesus up. He rebuked the wind and calmed the waves. The disciples murmured to each other in confusion, “Who is this? Even the winds and sea obey him?” They eventually make it to the other side of the lake. Hear now the word of God from Luke 8:26-39:

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me".²⁹for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it 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.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

³²Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³Then 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.

³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵Then 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. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹"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.

I can only imagine how those disciples who grew up on the right side of the lake in Galilee felt when Jesus said, "Let's go across to the other side!" Their mommas warned them about the other side of the sea, where the Gentiles live. It was an unclean place filled with unclean people and unclean things. They weren't supposed to go there.

Once they arrive, their worst fears are confirmed. They land at a graveyard. Not your average tourist destination. They're immediately met by a naked man who is howling and bruising himself with stones, shouting about being possessed by a legion of demons, flinging broken chains around. To top it all off, right there next to them is a herd of pigs! Definitely not where anyone wants to be, especially faithful Jews avoiding ritual impurity. Can't you just hear Bartholomew shouting, "Momma told me not to come!"

This is one of the strangest and most uncomfortable healing stories in the Gospels. For starters, those demons know exactly who Jesus is. "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God!?" they cry. Most of the characters in the gospel have no idea who Jesus is. The disciples constantly wonder, "Who is this then?" The crowds asked, "Who is this guy?" But there is one group who seems to always know who Jesus is: the demons. "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me."

Every time we hear this story, we focus on the man: his torment, his healing, his transformation, and his desire to follow Jesus. But today, I want us to look around him. To look beyond him. Because as strange as this man is, I want to suggest something even stranger: He may be the healthiest person in the story.

Bowen Family Systems Theory emphasizes that the family operates as an emotional unit, and each person has a specific function within the family. The family, like any system, seeks homeostasis—emotional equilibrium—and often unconsciously maintains this balance by projecting instability onto one member. This is the Identified Patient. The Identified Patient serves



as a focal point, allowing the family to avoid addressing deeper relational or structural tensions and is the one in the family who carries the symptoms. They're the one who acts out, breaks down, yells, cries, drinks too much, struggles publicly. But according to Bowen, they are rarely the root cause. More often, they are the sponge for the family's anxiety or dysfunction. The identified patient absorbs the pain no one else wants to name. The identified patient is the one who says with their body, their behavior, their breakdown: *Something is wrong here*. And in turn, the family says: *That person is the problem*. They hold the collective anxiety and dysfunction and become a scapegoat.

Bowen's theory is not limited to the nuclear family unit. The principles of systems theory apply across all human groups: friends, teams, businesses, churches, communities, cities, and entire nations. When anxiety rises, systems seek equilibrium, and often they do it by unconsciously choosing someone or some group of people to carry the burden of dysfunction. It's like emotional outsourcing. Sound familiar? Enter the man who lives among the tombs. The demoniac—naked, chained, screaming. He is the identified patient of the Gerasenes. Look at the way the community has arranged itself.

They've done everything they can to isolate him, pushing him out of town to live among the pigs and the dead. They tried to restrain him. He was kept under guard. And when that didn't work, they gave up. But he was not completely forgotten because he's still **functional** to the community. His suffering allows everyone else to pretend they are fine. He is the release valve. He is the scapegoat. He is the embodied dysfunction no one else wants to admit. He is Legion, for they are many. But they are not well.

Then Jesus shows up. And here is where things get interesting. Jesus does what Jesus does. He speaks to the man. *He sees him*. And not just the symptoms. Jesus speaks through the Legion to the *human*. He calls him out of the tombs, out of the shadows, out of his isolation. And for the first time in who knows how long, this man is clothed, sitting at Jesus' feet, in his right mind. He has been healed. This is supposed to be good news. But how does the town respond?

They were afraid. They begged Jesus to leave. Why?

Well apparently, the townspeople were more concerned with pigs and profits than with the person who is now healed to be who God created him to be once again. Apparently, Jesus poses a greater threat than that of the legion of demons.

Had they forgotten who the man was before the demons? Had they forgotten who they were? Had the profits from those pigs blinded them to that person stuck underneath Legion, living at the margins beyond the city limits? Had they sold their souls to that legion and forgotten their own names in the process?

Let me say it again: the man is healed, the demons are gone, and the people begged the healer to *go away*. Because Jesus, having healed the man, disrupted the system.



Now the community has no more scapegoat. No one to project their dysfunction onto. No easy target to carry the burden. No longer can they look at the man and say, *That's where the problem is*. They now have to look at themselves .At their fear. At their need for control. At their unwillingness to engage suffering with compassion. And for them that's just too much.

Maybe this is hitting too close to home because this has happened in your family. Sometimes we do it unconsciously—I mean the anxiety of the system has to go somewhere, and so we find a place for it to live. But most of the time in our culture we do it *systemically*. We find the ones who are most vulnerable, most visible, most different. And we declare: *They are the problem*.

Because as long as the problem is "out there," we don't have to deal with what's going on in here. We don't have to look at the systems that produce poverty. We don't have to interrogate our own addiction to power. We don't have to answer to the laws we break or the boundaries we cross or the lives we hurt or the death we cause. As long as the problem remains elsewhere, we don't have to examine our silence, our complicity, our fear.

We just send Jesus away, as did the Gerasene community.

And you know what... Jesus leaves. He doesn't force himself. He doesn't heal by coercion. He respects their no. But He leaves behind a witness. The man—now clothed, now healed, now free—begs to follow Jesus. And Jesus says, “No. Go home,” assuming he still has a home, “ And tell them what God has done for you.” He becomes the first preacher to the Decapolis. The first missionary to a Gentile region. He becomes a walking disruption and a living reminder. A healed man who reminds everyone: *There is another way*.

But let us not forget what started it all: Jesus asked him, "*What is your name?*"

It seems like a simple question. But it's an important one. He wasn't always “The Demoniac.” At some point in his life, he was a little boy, one of the children of that community running around and playing. We don't know when things went wrong for him. We don't know when those demons stole his life, or why they picked on him, or what happened to make him so vulnerable to the demons. Whomever he had been, his name was long forgotten. Now he was simply, “The Demoniac,” that crazy guy in the cemetery who keeps howling at the moon.

How often in our world today do we forget people's names, labeling them by the names of their demons?

When we don't know what to do with people whose lives get consumed by modern day demons, they wind up living among the tombs, pushed to the other side of the tracks, out on the margins of society, and we forget their names. They become “the homeless,” or “that junkie” or “that drunk,” or PTSD veteran, “that crazy guy,” known only by the demons that possess them, forgotten by the world that no longer knows their names. And you know what, they too were children once. And they become the identified patient, forced to hold all the anxiety of the system.



And then they forget their name too. What's your name? Alcoholic. Addict. Foreigner. Immigrant. Trans kid. Schizophrenic. Homeless. Depressed. Disabled. Anxious. Refugee. What's your name? Jesus asks. "Legion," says the man.

But that is not his name. That is the name of the pain that has possessed him. That is the voice of the system's projection. That is the noise of the trauma he has carried for others. That is not who he is. And Jesus didn't accept that answer as final. Jesus saw beyond the label. Jesus spoke to the human underneath.

Friends, this moment calls us to something deeper. Something braver. Because we live in a world of scapegoating. A world eager to name enemies so we don't have to name our fears. A world quick to assign blame so we don't have to shoulder responsibility, shoulder any responsibility for our economic instability, our divided communities, our imbalance of power and wealth, our climate disasters, our fragile mental health.

But we must not play along.

Who have we chained so we don't have to face our collective anxiety?

Whose torment are we tolerating to maintain the illusion of homeostasis?

Whose name have we replaced with our fear?

And what would happen if we stopped? If we listened? If we asked, with compassion: *What is your name?* and stayed long enough to hear the truth beneath the trauma?

What if the ones we've tried to silence are the very ones Jesus sends back to us, clothed and in their right mind, to proclaim what God has done?

This text offers us good news, yet good news is sometimes disruptive: Jesus doesn't just come to comfort the afflicted. He comes to afflict the comfortable. Jesus doesn't just heal individuals. He heals systems. Jesus doesn't just cast out demons. He exposes the economic and social arrangements that depend on those demons being there. He says: this one is not your scapegoat. This one is not your dumping ground. This one is beloved. And so are you. But you cannot be free until you let go of the lie that says someone else must carry your pain.

The Gerasene demoniac is not just a man in a story. He is the mirror showing us what we need to address. He is the truth-teller. And he is the preacher we weren't ready to hear. And Jesus? Well, He's still showing up. Still crossing boundaries. Still disrupting systems. Still casting out fear. Still making people whole. Are we brave enough to join in the work of wholeness? The work of healing ourselves and the systems we are part of from the inside out?



Beloved, we have two options: humble ourselves and begin telling the truth about our collective fears and anxiety and welcome healing or beg Jesus to leave and never face the uncomfortable issues at our core. May we choose truth. May we choose healing. May we stop playing the blame game.

Amen.

