

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
419 South Street
New Providence, New Jersey 07974

2 Pentecost: Proper 7 (C)

June 23, 2019

“Christ can heal the mind”

DRAFT

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Luke 8:26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As 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. When 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”—for 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.) Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now 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. Then 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. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then 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. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been

healed. Then 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. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; 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.

Touch our hearts, minds, feelings, and spirits, O Mighty Healer, God of all gods, King of all kings, Lord of all lords,

Emanuel, God among us, God beside us, and God with us, through Christ we pray.

Amen.

A few years ago, I was at the bus terminal of Newark Penn Station trying to buy a ticket to send a homeless person safely back home on a bus to some of their family members who could care for them. As I stood in the ticket line to buy the bus ticket, the person in front of me seemed to lash out at the ticket salesperson with a series of curse words and invectives that ‘colored the air very purple’. I was shocked at the loud and foul language of the person

standing at the ticket counter. But to my utter amazement, the ticket clerk quietly listened very carefully to what the foul-mouthed person was saying, and to my total astonishment he replied to the ticket buyer, ‘So that is one round trip ticket to Springfield, correct?’ Somehow the ticket seller was patiently able to discern that the seemingly outrageously angry man had Tourette’s Syndrome which rendered him incapable of proper English that evidenced itself in a whole series of curse words.

Tourette’s Syndrome is one of the mental illnesses that still baffles psychologists, and still little progress has been made in helping

those suffering from that syndrome find effective treatment, although there are some new pharmaceutical inventions that may become helpful in the next few years.

Tourette's is one of several mental illnesses which would have been called 'demons' in Jesus' time. And the language disability is not the most observed feature of Tourette's but rather tics or involuntary movements are more characteristic of this syndrome which affects some.

In my first year of medical school neurophysiology class we learned that schizophrenic persons not only can have a

second personality, but that that personality can have its own immunological system that is not the same as the other personality.

When the second personality is called forth and given a specific antigen, its immune system identifies that antigen and then begins to build immune defenses against that antigen. However, when the other, or another personality begins to dominate, that personality does not have immunity against that antigen. Thus, the immunological system is under the control of the neurological system. And indeed in a way there would be two separate entities inhabiting the same body by virtue of

separate and distinct neurologies. The implications of these findings may be profound. One possibility is that one personality may have immunity against certain cancer cells and is able to produce what is called, “remission”. But the other personality will not have that immunity and the cancer cells will begin to grow again when the person is controlled by that alternate personality. That would mean that the challenge of cancer may be a challenge of at least two of our personalities, one which is confident of defeating the cancer, and one which is fearful and thus susceptible to it. Thus, our state of mind may be the

determining factor for many cancers and other immunological diseases.

A few years ago, I was at a diocesan retreat to train people how to help churches make pastoral transitions. Part of our learning was that the way we perceive and respond to personality problems can have a major influence on the success of the outcome.

And the way we perceive and react to a traumatic situation can have a serious but potentially life-sparing result for the outcome. If we panic and only focus on the trauma and internalize how that trauma and

pain could have affected us had we been the injured person, then our real response would have been contrary to what a life-giving response in that situation would have been. Panic, in other words, is usually unproductive and is often even life threatening. Remaining calm and coming up with a preferred solution would be a far more healing approach.

In our Gospel lesson today, when Jesus encounters the demoniac, he does not recoil with horror at the stark nakedness of this possessed man; instead Jesus focuses on getting control of the causal factor. Jesus focuses on the basic reason for the man's

mental disability and seeks the name of the personality that is controlling the demoniac's behavior. The Legion of demons respond to Jesus' request for identity, and the demons realize they are in the presence of a 'higher spiritual power' that can cast demons into the "abyss", the place where demons can never escape. Instead the demons choose unclean animals, hogs, and escape into the sea, where only the hogs die. Drowning rarely if ever kills a demonic force. Osama's body was cast into the sea, but the forces of evil he embodied became even more forceful in the aftermath.

Only a higher power can control evil, and Jesus Christ is that higher power, bar none.

Jesus did not ignore the poor man's malady but immediately began to cast out the demon; the demon responded, "I beg you, do not torment me." Even demons fear the might of God who can cast them eternally into the "abyss", the place of weeping and wailing which no one and no thing can exit. And Jesus is, in a way, kind to the demons as he does not prevent them drowning a herd of hogs just to get away; their ultimate destruction was kept for another day—even Jesus has pity on sick and sickening demons. Jesus gave the

demons “permission” to inhabit the unclean swineherd. It is actually a playful Jewish joke that unclean spirits are permitted by Jesus to inhabit unclean farm animals, pigs or hogs, which no self-respecting religious Jew would ever see fit to eat or associate with. That Jesus was in Gentile country gives a Jewish person a wink that those Gentiles who know nothing about what is dietarily clean and what is unclean.

I have from time to time encountered people who would fit the description of being ‘demon possessed’. If a person suffered cruel abuse as a child or teenager, the wounds are deep and troubling. Alcohol

and other substances remove the person's normal ability to contain their demons, but in an inebriated state, all control is lost, and the demon or alternate personality or wild thought suddenly takes control. The result can be violent or at least very disconcerting.

Alzheimer's is one mental malady that was not even described or recognized a few decades ago. Now it is the commonly used term for all sorts of brain anomalies which produce severe forgetfulness. As a seminarian years ago, I discovered that one of our parishioners had been put into a mental hospital by the Rector while I was on

vacation. I could not find out why, there were no written records, and when I talked to her she sounded completely OK. So I got her discharged from the hospital into the hands of a full duty care nurse. However, the parishioner's behavior deteriorated so much in three days that the nurse quit, and then I as a seminarian had full charge of her case as well as trying to go full time to seminary, and she was indeed a handful. In the end, probably over a hundred other parishioners volunteered to care for her as we sought her admission to the nursing home where she had been on the board of directors. However, Alzheimer's was not on

anyone's 'radar screen' at that early time, and the nursing home was unwilling to care for her. So, our church took over in marvelous ways by visiting her every day seven days a week, and with the help of two very dedicated nurses aides from the Seventh Day Adventist Church, we were able to care for her for many months until the nursing home opened a complete floor to care for Alzheimer's patients. When this malady strikes, the best way I found to be able to care for such a patient was to live in their world; it would be a world that changed weekly and oftentimes daily, with

unpredictable ups and downs. Mental illness is very challenging, to say the least.

Mental illness is still a major challenge in western society. We avoid it; we abhor it; but rarely do we proactively treat it; and over extended time mental illness becomes less and less curable. A long-term schizophrenic has very little hope of healing, a psychiatrist confided to me. But in general, we as a society ignore signals of demon possession, of serious mental illness, and society is always less well off as a result. America needs to begin to focus on the treatment of mental illness as much as

we focus on physical illness. Both can be life threatening; both can kill. Ignoring mental disease can be very traumatic for society.

Jesus however shows respect for the causes of mental illness in today's gospel. Jesus does not curse the demon, Jesus does not ignore the demon; instead, Jesus begins to build a bridge of respectability with the demon, acknowledging the demon by its name and acquiescing to the demon's fear of the abyss of eternal fire. Even demons get a second chance with Jesus. The forgiveness we see in today's story is beyond our wildest expectation, as Jesus gives the

demon a way out that is not final and not eternally unredeemable.

What about us? Are we able to see through the facade of mental illness to the ultimately valuable and loveable person being controlled by the disease?

For God so loved the world, the normal as well as the not so normal, that whosoever should believe in him shall have life eternal.

Amen.