

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
September 15, 2013  
Luke 8: 26-39

### **“What’s In a Name?”**

*Living God, you call us to yourself so that we may live in wholeness with ourselves and our neighbors. Unchain your people and set us free to rejoice in your saving word, through Jesus Christ, Our savior. Amen.*

There once was a pastor who was visiting a very sick parishioner in the hospital. As the pastor sat by the bedside, talking about life and love, and God and Jesus, she took out her old, battered prayer book and communion kit and celebrated a bedside Eucharist. Almost absent-mindedly, she finished the service by anointing the patient’s head with oil and praying a prayer for healing.

Suddenly the patient sat up straight, the color returned to his face, and the electric monitors in the room beeped and whirred and spun like crazy. Doctors and nurses ran into the room as the man started shouting, “I’m healed, I feel great, thank you Jesus!” The pastor dropped her book and communion kit and stood plastered against the wall.

Shaking their heads in amazement, the doctors finished examining the patient and declared him healed. The pastor came forward, hugged the parishioner and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving. She gathered her things and walked out of the room and down the hall and went down the elevator and to the lobby and then went to the hospital chapel and looked around carefully to make sure no one was there; then she looked up at the ceiling and hissed at God, “Don’t you ever do that to me again! You scared me to death!” (*Day One, XX*)

*8:35 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.*

C.S. Lewis wrote that there are two dangers when dealing with the topic of demons. One is having the attitude that demons don’t exist, while the other is being overly fascinated with them. Hollywood has dealt with demons repeatedly and usually depict them as caricatures. Because of this, I’d hazard a guess that most people either don’t believe in demons or don’t give them a second thought. However, for Jesus and for the people of his time, demon possession was very real and very dangerous. In the course of his ministry, Jesus spent a lot of time casting out demons, including many demons from the man in today’s story.

When Jesus asks the demoniac his name he says, “Legion. My name is Legion.” This is his name because he was possessed by more demons than he could count. For what it’s worth, a Roman army “legion” consisted of 6,000 soldiers, so we can be pretty sure that Luke uses this name to impress upon us that this man was possessed by a host of demons.

Legion is homeless. He lives in the town cemetery. He doesn't wear any clothes. The townspeople have shackled him with handcuffs and chains, and when he breaks through them, they shackle him again. They guard him constantly.

I'm taken with how Jesus asks the man, very simply, "What is your name?" Jesus heals many people who have no name, but he doesn't always stop to ask what a person's name is. But here he does. He stops to ask the naked, homeless madman who lives in the cemetery, "What is your name?" And the man answers, "Legion. My name is Legion," because that's how people have defined him, and how he, consequently, has defined himself.

I don't know about you, but I find it devastating that he has no name, no identity left, except for what he is captive to. It's not Bill or Bob or John or Frank; it's Legion. He's been completely defined by what assails him, by what robs him of joy and health, and by what hinders him and keeps him bound. In other words, he's defined by all those things that keep him from experiencing life in its abundance.

And here's the thing, and why I think this story is so important, and shouldn't be dismissed: I think a lot of us aren't all that different from Legion. Like Legion, we tend to define ourselves by our deficiencies and setbacks, our disappointments and failures. Not always, of course, but we do it enough that, like Legion, we start to believe our worst critics. Why is it that every time we want to take a risk and in this way be vulnerable, we are reminded of every failure, and every disappointment we've experienced before? Perhaps, because we've allowed those things to possess us. We, too, are Legion.

And not only this, we live in a culture that wants us to believe that we are lacking. The majority of advertisements we see or listen to have as their goal to make us feel insecure. Whether they focus on our looks or status, our possessions or our relationships, they try to create in us a sense of insufficiency that can only be remedied by buying the product being advertised. And all too often we comply. Not always, of course, but take a look around your home and notice for just a moment how many things you bought that you just didn't need. Not even a little bit. Why did we buy all this stuff? Because we believed the promise the product made, but before we could believe its promise we had to believe its claim: that we are insufficient. We, too, are Legion.

But then along comes Jesus who asks this man, "What is your name?" Since Jesus has never been one to tolerate insufficiency, or believe his worst critics, he exorcises the demons from the man. The townspeople, who took drastic measures to contain the man, come to see if it's true. And when they come, they see the man, whom they had taken careful precautions to shackle and guard, sitting at Jesus' feet. I love what the scripture says next, "It was a holy moment. And for a short time they were more reverent than curious." But then reality begins to set in for them.

And the townspeople ask Jesus to leave. Once again, I am taken with what the scripture says, “They got together and asked Jesus to leave. Too much change, too fast, and they were scared.”

The people had isolated Legion and had control of the situation. But Jesus entered their community and disturbed it and their way of life. Jesus had the power of God, and that is a power they couldn't manage, control, or calculate. God's power, even when used for the good of the community, is frightening. What will God do next in our community, the townspeople wondered. What will God do next? The question, apparently, was too fearful to answer, because they asked Jesus to leave. They made the choice to react to Jesus with fear rather than faith.

The thing is, on the whole, people like things just the way they are—even if they know something better is possible. Sure, the townspeople might not like it that a naked madman lives in their cemetery, but at least it's familiar. At least they know what to expect of him and the situation. He'd become part of their moral and social order. But when the demons leave and he's just Bill or Bob or Buddy, they don't know what to do. In fact, Luke says, they're downright mad.

The thing is, on the whole, we like things to stay the way they are—even if we know something better is possible. We might not be living up to our full potential, we may even be in a rut, but it's our rut and we're familiar with it. I really don't need or want God coming and messing around with it and creating some unforeseen or unexpected future because that's scary. If God can cure Legion what's God going to do with me? That's the way a lot of us think. So instead of trusting God, we trust our worst critics and allow them to define us. Odd as it may sound, we often prefer the devil we know to the freedom we do not. We, too, are Legion.

Julia and I have taken to watching on Friday nights the show “What Not to Wear”. If you don't know the show, it takes 1 unsuspecting woman and her entire wardrobe, dumps the wardrobe in the garbage but takes the woman to New York, and gives her \$5000 and an entirely new look.

But it's more than an exterior makeover; the host and hostess do some interior making over, too. They uncover a whole host of reasons why the person is hiding under unbecoming clothes, and it usually has to do with the person believing her worst critics: that she is really is fat and ugly and not worthy of looking or feeling beautiful. Because that's how people have defined her, and how she, consequently, has come to define herself.

Friends, there are so many voices trying to possess and discourage us that we might still call them Legion. Yet against all of them stands the still, small, but mighty voice of the one who still crosses oceans and boundaries to tell us of God's love and calls us back to our right minds and grace-filled identities. And when this voice calls to us, we need to find the courage to react with faith rather than fear.

Donald Juel, the NYT best-selling author of “Blue Like Jazz”, had his life changed when a man at a local church reacted with faith rather than fear, and asked Donald to write a column for the youth group newsletter. It was the first time, Donald said, that anyone had ever affirmed him-of anything! His life changed because one man at the local church responded in faith to a boy society had labeled a hood. But Instead of reacting in fear to some kid who looked and acted weird, the man from the local church stepped out of his comfort zone and responded in faith. Now, the boy who was known as “the kid without a Dad” was known as “the kid who can write really well” and went on to author a NYT best seller.

But even with a NYT bestseller Donald says, “I was filled with self pity,” until he read about Desmond Tutu. Tutu, when asked whom he wanted to serve on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, said he wanted victims to serve on the TRC, victims whose lives had been destroyed by apartheid. But, he said, I want them to be victims who have forgiven their oppressors. They cannot have self pity. They must be, Tutu said “wounded healers”. Donald took Tutu’s words as an invitation to take the wounds of his life and give back. But Donald also said, that his faith taught him that God can take the wounds of his life and heal the world with them. God can take the wounds of his life and heal the world with them.

Jesus tells Legion to stay in his hometown and tell everyone everything that God did for him. In essence, he tells Mob to take his wounds and heal the world. Perhaps, Jesus thinks, even though they are too scared to tolerate me, over time they’ll learn to live with the witness of this man. Perhaps this is the only way my grace and mercy can get through to them.

I think the lesson here, and the question, is how can we, both in our personal lives and in our communal life confer on each other new and life giving names, and how can we strengthen and encourage each other to live into the open futures they represent? How can we do that for each other?

I’m not sure I have the answer, but I know that somehow that answer resides deep in our faith and that God has the power to create a new and better future. And that, just like Mob, we are called to tell everyone everything all that God has done for us.

Amen.