

“GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS:  
IV – THROUGH HEALING!”  
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Psalm 30

Luke 8:26-39

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.” So wrote William Shakespeare in the play “Romeo and Juliet.”

What’s in a name? Turns out – a lot! Especially in this morning’s Gospel lesson. You heard the reading. Jesus and his disciples were traveling. They left Galilee and went into a land of the Gentiles, the country of the Gerasenes.

When he got there, Jesus met a man well known by all of the town. He was the kind of guy everybody knew about. They’d seen him around for years, they knew his story. He was kind of like a local legend, if you will. Most towns have people like that, they’re seen, usually from afar. Some of them are eccentric, they’re a bit different.

Well, this man was one of those, but his situation is pretty dramatic. Did you hear about all of the things he did? First of all, he was possessed by demons, a lot of them, Luke calls them a legion of demons. Secondly, he had a penchant for going around naked, and thirdly, he lived in the cemetery, among the tombs. As far as the townspeople were concerned, he was the crazy, naked guy living in the cemetery. Oh, they knew him all right, and as long as he stayed right where he was, he could be as crazy as he wanted – they just didn't mess with him.

That's sad enough – how the townspeople treated him – but what's maybe sadder still, is how he treated himself. For did you hear what he said to Jesus when Jesus asked him “What is your name?” He said, “My name is Legion.” “My name is Legion.”

Pastor David Lose, in a tremendous sermon on this passage, wrote about that moment in time. He said, “The heartbreaking moment in this story for me is when Jesus asks the man his name . . . I find it devastating that he has no name, no identity left, except for what he is captive to. It's not Elijah, or Isaac, or John, or Frank, or Jo Jo, it's Legion. He has been completely defined by what assails him, by what robs him of joy and health, by what hinders him and keeps him bound, by all

those things that keep him from experiencing life in its abundance.” (On-line, “Legion,” David Lose, 6/16/13)

It is incredibly sad that that man identifies himself by his situation, for he’s begun to see himself only in terms of what’s wrong with him. He’s believing what he’s overheard the townspeople say about him. He’s forgotten who he really is, and only knows himself as one who is possessed, who is mentally ill.

I wish I could say that this is just his story in that day and time, but truth be told, it’s the story of a lot of people, even in this day and time. People who name themselves by their struggles. The struggles have so overwhelmed them, that they can’t remember who they are apart from them.

So, what is your name, is answered by “My name is homeless,” or “my name is drug addict or alcoholic,” or “my name is jobless,” or “my name is divorced,” or “my name is cancer,” or “my name is . . .” well, you get the idea, whatever it is with which they are struggling. Sometimes life does get so bad and overwhelming that you can’t remember who you are, except for that with which you’re struggling.

A pastor named Janet Hunt writes about how her mother went through something like that years and years ago. She was a young mother at the time, and one day, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Although she had tested positive, the extent of her infection was extremely small, about the size of a dime on one lung.

But that didn't matter, for her doctor had her admitted to a TB sanitarium, and said she'd probably be there for six months. She lost her job as a teacher, and was cut off from everyone and everything she knew and loved.

As you might imagine, it was a horrible experience for her. She was living among the dying, and though she got cards and letters, hardly anyone came to visit her, because they were afraid.

Nine weeks after she was admitted, she was sent home, because she wasn't really that sick (as the original diagnosis had shown before an over-zealous doctor had sent her there). But the sad thing is that even when she was home, the stigma of her disease remained. Janet writes that, "While her life mostly picked up where she had left off months before, she would never be quite the same again." (On-line, "Of Pigs and Sacrifice and Foreshadowing," Janet Hunt)

How incredibly sad for Janet's mother and for that demon-possessed man – to be known by your struggles rather than who you really are, and even more, to be held at arms' length because of it. That poor demon-possessed man was totally alone, no doubt constantly aware of the stares from afar, because no one would dare come near him.

Until Jesus. Jesus crossed that imaginary line. Jesus dared go where others wouldn't. Jesus walked right up to him, knowing full well he was possessed. Jesus didn't even let that man's own boundary stand in his way. He didn't care that the man put up a wall between them. He didn't care that the man thought he was lost forever because of his illness – Jesus crossed that line – and healed him – made him whole. The demons left that man, and he was healthy and whole again.

Jesus' life and ministry was all about crossing boundaries. We see it again and again throughout the scriptures. It doesn't matter what society thinks, Jesus crosses boundaries, always erring on the side of love and grace. Whether it's defending a woman about to be stoned, or talking a tax-collector down out of a tree, or healing a leper on the Sabbath, or in a thousand different scenarios, Jesus crossed the boundaries society had set up to heal those who were struggling. And whether they called themselves something other than their given names, instead

saying “My name is adulterer,” or “my name is tax collector and cheater,” or “my name is leprosy,” even still, Jesus went to them and healed them and made them whole.

Jesus crossed boundaries his entire ministry and crosses them even today.

Having crossed the boundary and healed the man possessed by demons, Jesus then did something which seems a little surprising. The healed man wanted more than anything to go with him and his disciples. He wanted to join their merry band and celebrate his new life. But Jesus said “No.” He told him to stay where he was, for by staying right there he would show the world that had so snubbed him, the power and grace of God. He would show them how God could change lives. He would be the living and breathing evidence of what God could do.

And that’s just what that man did. It wasn’t easy, because you heard in the reading that the townspeople weren’t nearly as excited about his healing as he was. He was a new man, living a new life, and they had kind of gotten used to him as he was before. It was easier to just look at him, shake their heads, and leave him alone. But now he was free and new and living among them. They weren’t ready

for that. Still, nothing could stop him from proclaiming what God had done for him, and he roamed the city freely telling anyone who would listen.

Oh friends, this Bible story has so much for us to think about, and so many questions I think we should be asking ourselves. But let me just suggest four quick ones this morning.

First, as we look around our world, our country, and even our town, what do we name, and how do we treat those who are battling demons or struggling in any way? Are we like those townspeople in the Bible story, keeping our distance from them, labeling them by their circumstance or struggle – “homeless, drug addicted, alcoholic, jobless”?

When we do that, we’re only making them more isolated. I have heard people who are struggling tell about how they yearn for human contact, for someone just to look them in the eye or talk to them. And then I think about all those times I’ve come upon a corner where someone is standing with a sign asking for help and how I’ve turned and looked away – not wanting to make eye contact or engage with them. Would a smile have hurt? Would a “I’m praying for you” have hurt? Would a

word telling them where to find some help have hurt? Yet, too often, like those townspeople in the story, you and I put up boundaries between us and those who are struggling and don't engage with them.

Perhaps this man's story will compel us to do better.

So, the second question I would pose is: Just how can we be more like Jesus with those who are struggling? Well, first of all, we need to give them the dignity of not identifying them, not calling them, by their struggles. And then, finding the courage to cross boundaries, even if we're uncomfortable, to help.

You know, this week I had occasion to be with Mike Brandon, who is the Executive Director of the Paris Foundation, and I heard about the tremendous strides that have been made in helping alleviate homelessness in Elkton and in Cecil County. And one of the reasons that is happening is because people like those involved in the Paris Foundation are seeing people without homes as people just like themselves. They're looking them in the eye, sitting down and eating with them, offering classes, offering a hand of help, not just a handout. They know their



names. They're doing what Jesus did every day of his life. It's what we can do as well. Indeed, it's what we're called to do as followers of that same Jesus.

The third question I ask this morning is much more personal. What name do you call yourself? If Jesus stood before you, and said "What is your name?" how would you answer him? What do you call yourself? Be honest. I'm fairly certain that all of us, at one time or another in our lives, have named ourselves something other than our given name, something with which we're struggling. Sometimes, sadly, we talk to ourselves in ways we would never talk to someone else. We're hard on ourselves, we beat ourselves up, we too, like that man in the story start to see ourselves through the eyes of our struggles.

If you're in that place today, I pray that you will let that go, that you will not identify who you are by your struggles, instead identify yourself as who you really are – a beloved child of God. Your struggles will not magically disappear, but they do not have to define who you are. You are a beloved child of God, first and foremost. You are a beloved child of God.

Finally, a last question and a challenge for all of us. How can we do what Jesus asked the healed man to do – and that is, share the story of what Jesus has done in our lives? Well, we can do it everyday in the words we speak, the way we act, the way we treat others. A smile on our face might warm the heart of one who is lonely. A word of kindness or just greeting might turn someone’s day around. A hug might be the only human contact someone has had for a while. An invitation to church might be what someone has been waiting for, because no one has asked them before. A card or a letter to someone who is struggling, telling them how God led you out of your struggle and made you whole might be just the encouragement they need.

What if we got up each day thinking to ourselves, “How can I on this day make Christ’s love real for someone else?” I wonder what would happen? I can tell you this, we might break through a shell that someone has put up around them, we might help someone see themselves as a child of God rather than a person defined by their struggles.

So why don’t we try it? Why don’t we start each day this week saying to ourselves, “What can I do today to make Christ’s love real for someone else?” and see what happens! Maybe it will take us one step closer to that day when everyone

knows the love of Jesus Christ and calls themselves by one name and one name alone, "Beloved child of God." May it be so!

Amen.