

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the terrible news of a shooting at St. Stephen's Church in Vestavia Hills, Alabama. My sermon is not about that, but I will follow our bishop's suggestion and use the prayer our Presiding Bishop has composed in response to that tragedy during the Prayers of the People.

One time on "Car Talk," the brothers told the story of a man who came to his mechanic for a new clutch, an expensive repair, but one that is very rarely needed. Maybe once every eight or ten years. But this customer returned a few months later needing the same repair again. This caught the mechanic's attention, and he asked if he might ride along and observe the customer's driving. The customer agreed, and sure enough, the mechanic saw that his customer was riding the clutch constantly. Trying to be helpful, the mechanic advised the customer that the transmission is not designed to be used in that way, that riding the clutch offers no benefit, but ensures that the clutch disc will wear out quickly, needing an endless and expensive series of replacements. Offended, the customer told him, I don't care how much I have to pay you, just don't tell me how to drive!

I don't know for certain if that story is true, but it certainly rings true. We've all been amused, or frustrated, when we see people stubbornly clinging to ways of doing things that cause trouble for themselves, or others. Perhaps we recognize such foibles in ourselves. Most people have at least one bad habit. But sometimes human intransigency costs far more than a car repair.

We don't know exactly what the deal was with the Gerasenes, but we can deduce that they had reached a consensus, as a community, on doing something bad. We do know that while most of the Gospel stories are set in Jewish territory, and a few stories are set in Samaria, where people worshipped the same God in a slightly different tradition, Gerasa was squarely in pagan territory. And we know that there were different kinds of paganism.

The oldest kind is called "totemism." That's the belief that every society has its own god, and each society's god is basically a projection or representation of that society. If such a society went to war with another totemistic society, they would assume that reflected a war between their gods, and the winning side obviously had the stronger god, so the losers would worship the winners' god and become integrated into their society.

Lesser known is the worst sort of paganism, the practice of demon worship. If that's what the Gerasenes had been up to, it would explain why one of them was possessed, and why the others wanted to maintain the status quo. Perhaps they feared that the demons that had tormented the man would come for them. Perhaps they feared that Jesus was just like them, only more powerful. Perhaps the man had once been a leader of their occult rituals, and he became possessed in a mishap that began with him saying, "Hey y'all, watch this!"

Most likely, though, the Gerasenes practiced the form of paganism most familiar to modern people, the philosophical paganism of Greco-Roman culture. I say that not just because that was the predominant form of paganism in that place and time, but also because the Gerasenes' treatment of the possessed man bears a striking resemblance to the Greek practice of *pharmakós*. That was a custom in which a disfavored person was singled out and expelled from a community, in the belief that doing so would purify the community or save them from some crisis.

That would also explain why the Gerasenes greet the man's liberation and recovery with fear, rather than wonder or joy. At once, his restoration threatened to revive whatever problem they had been trying to solve by exiling him, and promised that things were going to be different in the future. And then there's the problem with the pigs.

Ah yes, the pigs. They represented paganism too, not only because since Jews would have nothing to do with them, so only pagans would keep them, but also because the Jews living under Roman occupation called the soldiers "pigs," though generally not to their faces, I imagine. Between that and a "legion" of demons, the story had a political edge. Although the political message might have been for oppressed Jews to stay faithful and let God handle the Romans, just as God had drowned the army of Pharaoh.

The pigs also represented someone's livelihood, and the status quo. We see just how important those things are to God, in comparison with the revelation to the world of sacred truth. Remember that God loves us profoundly, and part of that love is wanting what's best for us, and while prosperity, stability, and security are good, a right relationship with God is what's best. From God's supreme point of view, the loss of a herd of pigs is a small price to pay for bringing a people in moral and spiritual error to the knowledge of the truth of God's sovereignty, and God's love.

That also explains another strange thing about this story. Jesus grants the demons' request to go into the pigs. He grants the complicit townspeople's request that he leave. But he denies the request of the man he'd healed, even though the man wanted only to follow Jesus, and might not be safe in Gerasa. That doesn't sound very compassionate, or even fair, but Jesus loved the Gerasenes, and could see that this man's testimony would make them turn from their ways and accept the truth of God's power over all things, and God's love for humanity, especially the most disfavored.

And then, in the middle of a story where Jesus is rejected and killed by the powerful, and misunderstood and abandoned by his own followers, another miracle occurs: the man obeys Jesus, "proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him." If everyone obeyed Jesus so readily, the world would be a better place.

This story isn't just about a man, or a town, or a manifestation of power that proved Jesus's divinity. This story is about us. Literal demonic possession isn't something that we worry about, and that's fine. What is not fine is that there is quite enough potential for evil already lurking in the dark corners of every human heart, no

supernatural influence required. We might not do many overtly evil things, but our comfort with the world's broken status quo is not so different from that of the Gerasenes'.

That's why it's so important that we recognize our need for God's influence over our wills. St. Luke showed that the Gerasene demoniac had been healed by describing him as literally "*clothed* and in his right mind." But decades earlier, St. Paul had addressed everyone living in sacramental, covenantal relationship with Jesus as those who "have clothed yourselves with Christ." And what an apt metaphor that is.

Every day adults decide what clothes to put on, and parents clothe their children. Clothing may be symbolic, but it is also always functional, allowing us to interact in natural and social environments where we otherwise could not. Choosing to put on Christ every day, that is, choosing to submit our will and identity to his, and to allow ourselves to express his message of good news, should come as naturally as any other part of our morning routine. Should. But too often we stubbornly cling to other garments, other ways of being in the world that quickly wear out, or that wear us out. We might throw on mass-produced social conformity, or meticulously fasten ourselves into tacky elitist aspiration, having shoved Christ to the far end of the rack without a thought, even though there is nothing finer in our closet.

We don't care how much he paid for us, we just don't want him getting in our way.

All this despite the fact that we also know that God wins in the end. All the universe belongs to God and even a terrifying legion of demons is nothing more to God than a convenient teaching device, a visual aid. We might assume that we are even less to God, and humility is good, except when it is based on falsehood. And indeed, we are precious to God, beloved, if wayward children, heirs according to the promise. Therefore God never stops reaching out to us, and is willing to upset and disrupt the world for us, even when we stubbornly cling to things we are deluded into finding more appealing than God.

When we do allow God to change us, though, when we do put on Christ and wear him with joy, he sets us free from our bonds, replaces our uncleanness with his pure love, and leads us out of the tombs, into the land of the living. And our joyful proclamation will lead others into the same life-giving, and hopefully life-changing, relationship.