

What is Your Name?

Luke 8:26-39

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 24th June 2007

Seeing the Sea of Galilee for the first time a few weeks ago was a life-changing moment, as I shared last week. Looking out over the lake high above Tiberius, I quickly asked one of our leaders, “Where is the land of the Gerasenes?” And he pointed straight across the sea, to the far side and said, “Gerasa is there.” The healing of the man who lived among the tombs is one of my favorite stories. I’ve preached on it several times, there’s so much contained in this story. Both Matthew and Mark include it in their gospel, as well. But this time reading through the text, especially after seeing Gerasa, at least from a distance, what caught my eye in the story, as if it were in bold print in my Bible: *What is your name?*

I’ve been thinking a lot about names lately, particularly since adopting a stray cat into my life. I wanted a good Scottish name, so I named him Angus. My friends want to know why I named him after a hamburger. I was at Pet Smart this week buying a collar (tartan, of course), so I joined their buyers club. On the form I had to indicate my cat’s name and his birthday (which I guessed). The cashier read his name and said, “Angus, like the beef?” looking at me as if I had six heads. I had to explain it was a common first name in Scotland.

If you have a cat or even if you don’t, whether you like cats or don’t, it’s easy to see that there’s something mysterious about them. Dogs respond to their names. As for cats, it all depends upon their mood. You can name your cat whatever you want, but that doesn’t mean she’ll respond to it. Insightfully, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), described this well in his poem, “The Naming of Cats.” You can name a cat just about anything you wish, give him an ordinary name. But a cat, Eliot believes,

*needs a name that’s particular,
A name that’s peculiar, and more dignified,
else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular...?*

But every cat has another name, he writes, that you can never guess, known only to the cat. Only the cat knows its true name.

*When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
His mind is engaged in rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
His ineffable effable*

Effanineffable

Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

What is your name? That's what Jesus wanted to know from this man of Gerasa. "How do you refer to yourself?" he wants to know. "How do you see yourself?" Do you notice how Jesus' question followed the demoniac's earlier naming of Jesus. The demoniac confessed Jesus' identity. He knows who Jesus is. But who is this man? What do we call him? He's generally referred to by scholars as the Gerasene demoniac; that's how I usually refer to him. But there's something wrong with this: it's identifying him according to his affliction. That is how he refers to himself, of course. "Legion," was his reply, although Jesus never calls him by that name, the name of affliction.

What is this name, "Legion?" The political overtones cannot be ignored. Only the Roman army had legions, consisting of approximately 6,000 soldiers. We know the Roman occupation of the Galilee was brutal and oppressive. Was this the source of his affliction? Was it driving him mad to the point that they had to keep him under guard, bound with chains and shackles? Was it this oppression that sent him out into the wilderness, away from society, away from people, away from the very circumstances driving him to the breaking point, leading him to inflict untold violence upon himself? Jesus finds him naked, without a home. He lived *in* the tombs, surrounded by death and decay. *In*, not *among* the tombs. *In* the tombs. People were often buried in tombs dug into hillsides. After the body decayed, the bones were removed and placed into an ossuary. Thus there could be empty tombs in which one could live. But living there in the tombs meant that he was ritually unclean, just like the pigs which are sacrificed for the sake of his healing. Being naked made one ritually unclean, too. Whatever the cause of his affliction and rage, it was intense. Here was a man lost and confused, cut off from family and friends, whose pain and sorrow were deep and full of despair.

Jesus comes only in love, but in the confusion of his despair he expects only further torment. Is that all the man knows? Jesus comes with healing, but the man expects only further suffering. The possibility of liberty and release are beyond the scope of his imagination. He suffers without hope. Jesus approaches with liberation, but it's too much for him. The man is consumed by the demons. It's difficult even to know who's doing the talking here, the man or the demon legions or both, because it's the demons who beg Jesus not to destroy them. It's remarkable, too, that Jesus has compassion on the demons. They prefer drowning than being sent back into the abyss, a prison for wayward spirits. So the demons are transferred to the pigs, which in a Jewish worldview are dispensable – unless of course you're one of the swineherds who just watched his livelihood and pension jump off the cliff. Can you imagine what was

going through their minds? They run off in shock to tell others what happened and a crowd soon returns.

There they are, just the two of them: *Jesus and the man*. Were they waiting for the crowd to come? How long did they wait? The crowd arrives and finds the man clothed, sitting beside Jesus' feet, and in his right mind, a man made whole -- and that's when a whole new set of problems present themselves. You would think the people would be happy for the man, grateful for Jesus' gift of healing. But, no. The swineherds are angry about the financial loss, but the crowd, the crowd has something else to worry about, far more threatening. The text says, "And they were afraid." Word spreads, anxiety builds, and soon the crowds want Jesus to leave because they were "seized with great fear." Where else do we hear this phrase, being seized or filled "with great fear?" The same words are used to describe the shepherds' reaction to angels announcing Jesus' birth. And where is that account? Luke 2. This is a deep theme throughout Luke, fear-fear not. Although Jesus never says, "Fear not" to the crowd here.

What are they afraid of? Is this Luke's way of saying Jesus was a political threat to the powers that be, by drowning a legion of demons? One could probably make a very strong case for a political reading. There is also a deep theological and therefore practical reading. What kind of fear? Afraid of God? Afraid of healing? Afraid of liberation? Afraid of God actually getting involved in their lives and messing things up? What is it about seeing a healthy, restored man that scares them so? Why is Jesus such a threat? Because, I think, the presence of God, despite how much we hope for it and pray for it, even though He moves toward us with love and grace and healing, is almost always first perceived as a threat, a disturbing and unsettling experience which disrupts our world. It's a world that really doesn't welcome God on God's terms, a world where we really prefer the *status quo*, and people remain in their place easily labeled – saints over here, sinners over there; clean over here, unclean over there; a world that prefers people remain sick because their move toward health becomes an indictment against everything in society that makes them sick and keeps them there; a world where commerce goes on as usual, and little is questioned. The kingdom of God will not settle for such a world. Jesus threatens and undermines all of this – then and now.

It's not surprising that the crowd demands Jesus to leave, because too much is at stake and they know it. And it's also not surprising that the man wants to go with him, begging Jesus, "Take me with you," because he knows how difficult his life is going to be living among those people, who obviously did little to help him. Indeed, even their pieties and obsessions with purity inflicted considerable harm upon him; they could not

go near him without becoming impure. Not that Jesus cares about any of that. He doesn't give a damn about that, but shows up at the tombs. But the man is worried about living among these people who are not really open to God's grace, these people who have hurt him and kept him stuck in his despair, who could not rejoice in his healing, people afraid of the presence of God. You would want to go with Jesus, too, thinking, "Get me away from these people."

However, Jesus says to him, "Go home." "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So that is what the man, the former demoniac, the one named Legion does. He goes home. It almost sounds cruel. Why does Jesus do this? Maybe it has something to do with his name.

We never learn his real name. What name did his father and mother give him at birth? More significantly, if Jesus asked him in five years, post-grace, "What is your name?" What would he say? How do the villagers refer to him now? What is his grace-name? We never know. But, I wonder if, perhaps, that's why he was left behind: *in order to discover his real name in the midst of the very people who prefer to know him by another name.*¹ If you think about it, isn't this what we're all trying to do, as individuals in Christ and as a community of faith? *Discovering and living into our real name in the mist of people who prefer to know us by another name.* We are enfleshing grace where we live. Claiming God's grace and healing, claiming our true identities in Christ, and then declaring, living, showing what God has done for us with the very people who daily surround us.

So, go and witness, dare to declare God's grace, precisely to, among, and with people who are graceless.

Go and witness, extend God's forgiveness precisely to people who are unwilling to forgive, who are frightened by grace and scared of mercy.

Be my witnesses in a world that is tearing itself apart with violence and war and hatred and even toxic religion and fear-based spiritualities, tell them that healing is possible, there is a still more perfect way.

Be my witness of sanity, of health, of wholeness in a world that too easily drives us to despair and even madness.

In the midst of the tombs, when death comes like a thief in the night, in senseless suffering, sorrow, and tragedy, stand there as my witness and dare to declare that you've encountered the presence of God precisely there!

¹ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "A man's life proceeds from his name in the way that a river proceeds from its source." N. Scott Momaday, *The Names: A Memoir* (1996).

Be my witness; declare it possible that all that enslaves and binds and holds us captive can be overcome by the One who longs for us to be known not by our afflictions, but by our true name, the deep, inscrutable name, known to our hearts of hearts and to God.

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