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**WHAT IS YOUR NAME?**

**Pentecost ,c, July 15, 2007**

**Luke 8:26-39**

It was a blistering hot mid-July day in 1978 at Washington D.C.'s St.

Elizabeths Federal Mental Hospital. I was in a chaplaincy training program making my rounds of the ward that day, when Mike, one of the patients that I regularly visited with, saw me coming 50 feet away. When Mike saw me, his face lit up and he exclaimed, "Oh Chaplain!" and ran back into his room.

I don't remember Mike's psychiatric classification, but I do remember that Mike was a lifer in St. Elizabeths. He had been there for eight years following his abusing the drug PCP. The only time Mike had been out of the Hospital since was once when he escaped with another patient. Mike was only AWOL a few hours then though, as he was picked up as he walked barefoot on a hot summer day down the middle of a 4 lane highway there in D.C.

When Mike re- emerged from his room, again on the run, this time towards me, he was carrying a light green hard covered edition of the New Testament, King James Version, that he had obtained from the Gideons.

"Chaplain! Chaplain! I've got to talk to you. You remember the rat dreams I

told you about."

Mike had had frightening dreams about ferocious rats, in enormous packs, working their way through tunnels in the earth, sewers, and such preparing to attack and devour all life above ground. These persistent dreams or hallucinations were so real that they terrified him.

"Look Chaplain!" And he fumbled through the beginning the Gospel of Matthew until he found Chapter 6:9 ff

"After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."

Then Mike stopped and looked at me. I could feel that he was waiting for me.

"Yes, the Lord's Prayer." I said.

"No, don't you get it? Thy will be done in earth" IN EARTH!! THE RATS ARE IN THE EARTH. GOD WANTS THEM TO TAKE OVER THE EARTH.

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The world of the severely mentally ill may seem to be our best vantage point to begin to understand something of the phenomena the Bible calls DEMON POSSESSION. In our passage from Luke, we have the tale of a man so absolutely

insane by the standards of the world that he would not, could not, or was not permitted to cohabit in the village with the other so called normal folks. Clearly persons who are so broken at the core of their being that they cannot seem to keep in touch with reality, like the Gerasene demoniac, and like my friend Mike would be likely targets for the label DEMON POSSESSED. But do we have to look so far?

Have you ever committed yourself to a direction in life that you thought to wholesome, only to find yourself unable to make that change?

- Did you try to stop smoking and fall short of the goal?
- Did you ever start a diet, committed to taking off those pounds, only to find your will power not up to the task?
- Did you make a New Year's resolution to regularly exercise, only to roll over the next morning and go back to sleep instead?
- Maybe you promised yourself never to yell at the children when they riled you.
- I know some of you have promised yourselves to make a more regular committed prayer time, more Bible study time, more regular worship attendance.... but something keeps getting in your way, keeping us from healing that brokenness that we yearn to fix.

We are all in need of this healing. Every one of us is broken and addicted and hurting. Let me repeat. Every one of us is broken and addicted and hurting. Look around at your sisters and brothers, not a one of us escapes. It is part of the human condition.

Now, you don't have to call your inability to do what you know right as demon possession, but that is exactly what the Bible calls it. And even our Christian faith doesn't protect us from these demons..... only from the demons' ultimate victory in the battles that must take place.

The Apostle Paul names it in his Letter to the Romans:

- 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.  
20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.  
21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.  
22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,  
23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.  
24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

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We all know something of the experience of DEMON POSSESSION. And it is good that we do. Because until we are aware of the possibility of the demonic loss of our selves, we cannot do battle against it, nor can we really be of compassionate help to others who so struggle. When we recognize that the processes within the Gerasene, and Mike, are the same processes at work within

each of us... then we begin the healing within ourselves and then later between ourselves and these others.

In the story of Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene demoniac, even as he is casting out the demon, Jesus asks "WHAT IS YOUR NAME?" For in olden times when they had a name for the demon they believed that had some better control over it. <sup>1</sup> Likewise, once they had undergone a transformation, their names were changed to reflect their new character.

- Abram, which means “exalted father” has his name changed when the 99 yr. old is promised the long yearned for children, and his name becomes Abraham, which means “father of a multitude.”
- His wife Sarai whose name means “to persist, to persevere, to contend” is changed to Sarah, “princess” because of the same promise which soon comes to fruition.
- Their grandson Jacob wrestles all night with a spirit identified as God down by the Jabbok River. His name Jacob- which means “usurper” or “supplanter,” and quite accurately described his deceitful nature to that time. His name is changed to Israel- which means “He who struggles with God.” His name change retells and reflects his transformation.
- In our day, if we changed names like this to match our character, the San

Antonio Spurs basketball star's name would be changed from Tim Duncan, to Tim Dunkman,

- and our own Austin bicycling superstar and Tour de France repeating champion Lance Armstrong would have his name changed to Lance Legstrong, or Lance Heartstrong.

Let's be honest, even in our own day, when we have name, an identity for the trouble at hand; when we have a diagnosis, we feel we are on the way to handling the situation. When we can get a hold on the difficulties... we at least have a chance of dealing with them.

An AA meeting begins, "My name is John, and I am an alcoholic."

Gamblers Anonymous begins its 12 step program with these:

1. We admitted we were powerless over gambling - that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to a normal way of thinking and living.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of this Power...

We need to name the demons that are working us to prevent us from becoming the fullness of the image of Christ. We need to carefully, lovingly, honestly NAME the old attitudes and poor habits that stop us from becoming that which we know is our holy calling from God.

In this passage Jesus asks, “WHAT IS YOUR NAME?” and the response that Jesus' gets to his question is stunning...LEGION. So many demons had entered him! The word LEGION meant the number of soldiers in a Roman Legion, just over 6,000. And since the number of demons was then and now an indication of power of the problem, the poor fellow must have been hopeless. There was no center left in him! Chaos reigned. Any semblance of order, of self had faded off into the anguished anarchy of disintegration.

Have you ever been here? Over the edge in total breakdown? Have you ever been near the edge?

Even near the edge, one knows and avoids pain. Do Not Torment Me, the demoniac had cried. Do not make my bad matters worse by trying to change me. Ah! Do you know that one, too? Don't challenge me to change Jesus. Leave me be. Don't tell me that there is so much I can become, so much richer a life, if I will but risk the awful changes. Don't tell me that I am truly forgiven, set free from the shallow life I have come to know! I have grown used to these chains. I love them. Do Not Torment Me, Jesus of Nazareth!

Even when the news should seem to be good, we often feel God's work in us as torment. God feels like the enemy demanding new discipline, new exertion, demanding more than we want to give up. Most people, I believe, never get beyond

this kind of relationship with God. They remain at a distance from God that they enforce rather than submit themselves to change that they cannot control. God remains the distant rule giver, the stern parent, the demanding One.

But for some that distance collapses.. either quickly and dramatically, or slowly and gracefully. When that person stops resisting the call of God; stops setting the rules by which the divine can approach. And the presence of God becomes both more majestic and at the same time, nearer. More powerful and at the same time more familiar. Then the mystery of God encroaches on the everyday life of that blessed soul, and communion, true communion begins.

God is still God, but now also, a companion in a special way. One's relationship with God then provides a sounder, surer foundation for life. Compassion for others just naturally begins to flow. The person may not be able to say what has changed, but both from the outside and inside, there is a new wholesomeness... healing.

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22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,  
23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.  
24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?  
25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

For the demoniac it happened in the blink of an eye. One moment he raged

out of control. Then, in no time at all, he was clothed, calmed, controlled and sitting at the feet of Jesus. Sitting in the place where God and humanity coincide. Sitting, learning, rejoicing in the presence of a power even greater than all that seeks to divide us.

The living spirit of Jesus Christ is today asking each of us to state our spiritual condition, too. “What is your name?”, Christ asks.

What will we answer?

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<sup>i</sup> See Gen. 32:22ff. 22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

27 So he said to him, "**What is your name?**" And he said, "Jacob."

28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."