

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Pentecost June 24 2007 Yr C  
I kings 19:1-15; Psalm 42, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39  
The Rev. Dr. Seamus P. Doyle

From a plain reading of this morning's Gospel story, or to put it another way, from a literal reading of it, we have the story of a man who claims to be possessed. The spirits recognized Jesus and want nothing to do with him. The demons leave the man and, with the permission of Jesus, enter a herd of swine and they promptly commit suicide. The local farmers ask Jesus to leave as they are afraid of him but before he leaves the man from whom the demons have been expelled beg to be granted permission to join him but Jesus says *Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you. So he went away, proclaiming how much Jesus had done for him.*

The author, John Killinger, tells a powerful story about a man who is all-alone in a hotel room in Canada. "The man is in a state of deep depression. He is so depressed that he can't even bring himself to go downstairs to the restaurant to eat. He is a powerful man usually the chairman of a large shipping company but at this moment, he is absolutely overwhelmed by the pressures and demands of life. and he lies there on a lonely hotel bed far from home wallowing in self-pity.

All of his life, he has been a demanding person, worrying about everything, anxious and fretful, always fussing and stewing over every detail. And now, at mid-life, his anxiety has gotten the best of him, even to the extent that it is difficult for him to sleep and to eat. He worries and broods and agonizes about everything, his business, his investments, his decisions, his family, his health, even, his dogs. Then, on this day in this Canadian hotel, he craters. He hits bottom. Filled with anxiety, completely immobilized, paralyzed by his emotional despair, unable to leave his room,

lying on his bed, he moans out loud: "Life isn't worth living this way, I wish I were dead!" And then, he wonders, what God would think if he heard him talking this way. Speaking aloud again he says, "God, it's a joke, isn't it? Life is nothing but a joke." Suddenly, it occurs to the man that this is the first time he's talked to God since he was a little boy. He is silent for a moment and then he begins to pray. He describes it like this: "I just talked out loud about what a mess my life was in and how tired I was and how much I wanted things to be different in my life. And you know what happened next? A voice!! I heard a voice say, 'It doesn't have to be that way!' That's all."

He went home and talked to his wife about what happened. He talked to his brother who is a minister and asked him: "Do you think it was God speaking to me?" The brother said: "Of course, because that is the message of God to you and everyone of us. That's the message of the Bible. That's why Jesus Christ came into the world to save us, to deliver us, to free us, to change us and to show us that 'It doesn't have to be that way.' A few days later, the man called his brother and said, "You were right. It has really happened. I've done it. I've had a rebirth. I'm a new man. Christ has turned it around for me." Well, the man is still prone to anxiety. He still has to work hard. But, now he has a source of strength. During the week, he often leaves his work-desk and goes to the church near his office. He sits there and prays. He says: "It clears my head. It reminds me of who I am and whose I am. Each time as I sit there in the Sanctuary, I think back to that day in that hotel room in Canada and how depressed and lonely and lost I felt and I hear that voice saying: "It doesn't have to be that way."

That is precisely what this story is all about. Jesus walks into the tormented life of the Gerasene demoniac, this madman, whose life is coming apart at the seams and turns it around for him. He gives him a new beginning, a new start, a new birth. At the beginning of the narrative, it sounds like a horror-story. This wild-eyed, adrenalin-filled, madman comes running and shrieking out of the tomb. He is so unbalanced! He is convinced that he is being held captive by a whole legion of demons, who are pulling and jerking him in every direction. This is an eerie, grim, suspenseful, frightening situation. Jesus and His disciples have just come through a storm on the Sea of Galilee. It is nighttime and having survived that frightening storm they are thrilled to now set foot on solid ground. But, as they get out of the boat, they encounter a different kind of storm. yet another scary experience. They hear strange sounds coming from the tombs. shrieks, growls, screams, moans, the rattling of chains. Then, suddenly, a horrifying sight. A naked madman, bruised, dirty, bloody and battered with pieces of chains dangling from his arms and ankles, comes running and screaming directly toward them! Now, let me ask you something: "What would you have done in that situation?" This was a perilous place, a bloodcurdling moment. a powerful, dangerous, berserk man, charging them. I think I would have run for my life... or jumped back in the boat. But not Jesus! Jesus stood His ground and faced the madman. Undaunted, unafraid... Jesus stood there and dealt with this wild man. Jesus healed him. He brought peace to his troubled soul. He changed him. He cleansed him. He turned his life around. and you know (don't you?) that He can do that

for you. Now, let me underscore this and spell it out a bit more by lifting three ideas out of this great story...

1. You Don't Have to Be at War with Yourself.
2. You Don't Have to Be at War with Other People.
3. You Don't Have to Be at War with God.”

The man wanted to follow Jesus but Jesus *sent him away saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.*

Jesus did not tell him to study for three years to become a Jew. Jesus did not tell him that he must become circumcised before he would be permitted to preach the good news. Jesus put no limitations upon him. Rather he gave him blank permission to go and tell all that God had done for him. Jesus did not send him into a predominately Jewish community but rather a predominately Hellenistic community where there were many gods. We might conclude that this man became the first apostles to the Gentiles but he never got any credit for it. He did it because he was at peace with himself, others and God.

This is the heart of an evangelist. This in one whose life has been touched by God, whose attitude toward life has been changed, whose disturbed life has been quietened and who now wants to share this God-experience with others.

To not be at war with ourselves, others or God we can simply repeat a simple prayer that was composed some seventy years ago and is still being

said by thousands of people daily; it's the Serenity Prayer which was first composed by the great Protestant Theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr as part of a sermon.

“God, grant me the serenity (peace of mind)  
to accept the things I cannot change (other people, places and things),  
courage to change the things I can (myself)  
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;

Enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;

Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;

Trusting that you will make all things right,

if I surrender to Your will,

so that I may be reasonably happy in this life,

and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.”