**“Of Right Mind”** Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones  
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The great twentieth century Reformed theologian Karl Barth taught preachers to preach with the Bible in one hand the newspaper in the other. Meaning that our preaching should reflect on the concerns of the day and the people in the pews.

These days, when we carry a smart phone in hand and when the news is constantly changing, the task to frame a sermon that keeps up with current events becomes ever more challenging.

I believe that the stories in the Bible and the teachings of our Christian traditions are always relevant to what we encounter, because we are drawing upon the collective wisdom of thousands of years of human experience as they too grappled with similar events. We must open ourselves and cultivate the ability to hear God speaking to us in these ancient stories.

Hear now the Word of the Lord from the Gospel of Luke:

What are the pigs doing in this story? It’s one of those tiny details that we might slip by, missing their importance.

Because first century Jews didn’t eat pigs. So, if you wanted to make money in the local economy, and raise some livestock that would feed your neighbors—pigs would not be a wise investment for a Jewish farmer.

So, what are they doing here? Obviously somebody was having bacon for breakfast. If someone’s going to the trouble of raising a herd of swine, it is for some economic gain. Who is buying the pigs?

The non-Jews, of course. And most likely the occupying Roman imperial forces. Roman soldiers and functionaries of the government and any Roman citizens living in the area—they were the consumer market for bacon and ham.

The pigs in this story are a clue. A message we have to decode. They point to a colonial economy. They aren’t being raised for any local good, but to participate in the economy of the occupying, and oppressive, Roman Empire.

This story has layers. It’s more than a story about the healing of a deeply troubled and unwell man, though it is also about that. It’s a story that invites us to think well, to think deeply and critically, about what it is that makes humans unwell. What possesses us? What haunts us? What drives us out of our right minds?

This isn’t just a story about supernatural demons or even, if we take a more modern, medical lens and think of the man as experiencing a mental illness. The story is also about the culture and society, the systems that create the conditions for this man to be unwell.

There is, of course, another clue in the story that the Roman imperial system is implicated in the story—and that is in the name the demon gives to Jesus—“Legion.” A clear reference to the Roman army. This man is possessed by the spirit of the Roman army. His mind has been colonized. Colonial occupation has driven him out of his right mind.

And Jesus restores his mind. Makes him well again. Gives him back his dignity and his humanity.

Jesus does that by casting out the spirit of the Roman army and sending it careening over the cliff into the sea by casting it into the accursed herd of swine.

Layers of symbolism and meaning in the way Luke tells us this story.

What occupies us and drives us out of our right minds?

In the last few years have you ever felt like the situation of the world, or the news of the day, was driving you nuts?

Have you been consumed with worry for your grandchildren and the world they will inherit?

Have you felt so weighed down that you had trouble thinking or motivating yourself?

Have you had more trouble sleeping?

As a pastor, I hear these sorts of things from people.

Last night our family was leaving the movie theatre, having seen the new Disney film *Elio*, when I looked at my phone and learned the news of our attack upon Iran. What had been a fun evening immediately soured, of course. You could see the weight falling upon us. Ironically, the Disney film was about ending conflict by caring for one another.

When I returned home, I opened Facebook and started seeing all the bewildered and worried responses. And then, the memes began to appear. My favorite was, “I can’t believe it’s WWIII season already . . . I still have my pandemic decorations up.”

Last week we gathered here in worship in the wake of an assassination, when the perpetrator was still at large. This week we gather as the war drums sound.

It’s a lot.

So, what should we do?

First, let’s NOT be like the Gerasenes.

The commentaries I read were critical of the community this man has grown up in. They have excluded him from normal society, such that he now lives in the place of the dead. A clear indication of a form of what Orlando Patterson called “social death.” Patterson coined the term to refer to the impact of enslavement upon the dignity of a human person. This week we celebrated Juneteenth and the moment when emancipation finally spread to all of the United States. A great and joyful celebration of human freedom.

But also a time to remember and to reflect. The way we are treated by society can rob us of our dignity and our personhood and foreclose any opportunity to flourish.

The Gerasenes didn’t want to deal with this troubled man, didn’t want to face the reality of what was making him unwell, and their role in it. So, better to drive him away. Then, they don’t have to see it.

Commentator Brendan Byrne reads all of the Gospel of Luke through the lens of hospitality and how God, through Jesus, is extending hospitality to a wide range of people. This is one of the stories that upholds his analysis.

The Gerasenes are inhospitable towards one of their own. But Jesus extends a form of hospitality in restoring the humanity and the dignity of this troubled man. Then the Gerasenes are further inhospitable, this time towards Jesus and what he’s done. They still don’t want to face their own actions or the ways they are implicated in oppression and the social death of this child of their community. Byrne writes, “They can cope better, it seems, with the presence of the demonic than with a power that has reclaimed one of their number by confronting and naming the evil.”

Jesus has restored this man by “confronting and naming the evil” that has oppressed him and drawing our attention to it. The evil in this story flows from the imperial occupation, and the oppression, exclusion, injustice, and violence that results from it. The demonic is the evil of imperial occupation. And the effect it has upon the Gerasenes, leading them to inhospitality and the social death of one of their own.

This week I turned to the books of the theologian Walter Wink, who has helped to teach us how we should think of the demonic in our own time. Wink wrote a series of books on “the powers that be.” The first in that series is called *Naming the Powers.*

Wink argues that not only for this story, but for others in the biblical canon, the demonic is not really a supernatural force, but is a spiritual embodiment of how human power is organized, used, and abused. The demonic spirits in the New Testament are the powers—political, economic, cultural, religious, etc. He writes, “They are the systems themselves, the institutions and structures that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships.”

Think of all the systems, institutions, and structures that make organized human life work. These are the “powers.” Anything from the water department to the police to public schools, Wall Street, Amazon, and PBS. Even our artistic and cultural endeavors. And, yes, the church.

These things aren’t inherently bad or evil. In fact, as Wink writes, “They are necessary. They are useful. We could do nothing without them.” However, as he then quickly adds, “the powers are also the source of unmitigated evils.”

The worst violence, oppression, and injustice results from when the powers misuse their power and authority. They can crush the human soul, rob us of our dignity and our lives, and prevent our happiness and flourishing. When they are operating at their best, performing as God created them to, then they respect human dignity, protect our rights, develop our capacities, and support our flourishing.

As this Gospel story tells us, one can be made unwell and not of right mind, by the wider systems and structures that one has little to no control over. And that the path to a right mind is when those forces are cast out.

I had written the first draft of my sermon this week before the Supreme Court ruling that allows states to ban gender-affirming health care for trans kids and teens. So, I couldn’t help but frame my thoughts about the ruling through this Gospel lesson. While the ruling focused on the legislative powers of states to regulate medical care, the majority of the court seemed blind to the actual reality of trans kids, as writer M Gessen pointed out in the *New York Times*. They wrote, “I am asking you to imagine what it’s like to be a transgender teenager because that is exactly what the majority of the Supreme Court justices refused to do.” They continued:

I ask you to imagine that teenager, the one who has to leave Tennessee or this country. The one who has to go through “natal” puberty when everything about it feels wrong. The one who spends those hours in front of the mirror not trying to make their hair look good but trying to hide body parts that make them hate themselves. The one who adjusts, stuffing their desire, their shame and their hope into some dark closet of the mind.

The court seems have dealt in the abstract and not focused upon the well-being and dignity of actual human persons. A decision that will lead to death, both social and physical.

In the Gospel, the Gerasenes were afraid of this man, one of their own, and couldn’t face the reality of what was troubling him. That seems the same in this situation. M Gessen believes that this diminishment of human rights is occurring because of fear. They write, “This retrenchment is fueled by fear: fear of the future, fear of unfamiliar concepts, fear of not knowing one’s child.”

I would add that it’s also fueled by a refusal to face society’s role in causing gender dysphoria in the way we construct gender roles, set expectations, and put pressure upon our children.

So, to our trans and nonbinary children and youth and to their families, I say, “I’m sorry. We have worked hard to secure your human and civil rights and won’t stop in that effort. Today we cannot fix this ruling, but we can provide a place of belonging, where you are loved and cared for and your inherent human dignity is respected.”

To be more hospitable, is to be more like God. To be more open, inviting, inclusive, welcoming, friendly, compassionate. To respect each other and to recognize our inherent human dignity and the rights that come with that. The more we are hospitable, generous, and gracious people, the more we are like God and the way God desires us to be. That’s the basic lesson of this story and one of the central themes of the Gospel of Luke.

There is not much that we can do today to change a Supreme Court ruling, stop the bombs from falling, or even deal with the long history of slavery and its lasting effects upon this nation. We exist within larger social systems and structures that affect us. And those systems often cause us harm. They rob us of opportunities to flourish. Their actions weigh us down, sometimes even colonizing our minds and binds. We can be made unwell and not of right mind through no fault of our own but because of what happens in the wider world around us.

What we can do is try to be more like Jesus. To be more loving, giving our time and attention to the least of these. We can work to cultivate communities of compassion and belonging that are hospitable, welcoming, and inclusive. And we can engage in the work naming the powers that harm and oppress us, drawing attention to them, and then, cast them off. It’s not generally as easy as saying the right words and sending them over the cliff in a herd of swine. That work is long and hard and sometimes we face setbacks.

This week I was also drawn to the words of the theologian Kathryn Tanner. She writes, “The fulsome character of [God’s] grace means [that] . . . one has all one needs to meet the present the challenge.”

God wants us to live well. God wants us to flourish. And God has blessed the world with enough that we all might share in the blessings, if only we learned how to live well with each other.

In a time of war, violence, injustice, and oppression, I believe that the Christian church can, *and must,* be a witness to the wider culture. We must bear witness to the fulsomeness of God’s grace, a life of abundance and flourishing. We must bear witness to the goodness of God’s creation, God’s ongoing blessings, and the redemptive and reconciling project of God’s mission on the Earth. We must bear witness that something better is possible—a life of beauty, joy, adventure, and peace.

If we learn any actions from today’s gospel lesson, and the story of Jesus’ exorcism and healing of the Gerasene man, it should be that something better is possible. We can extend the hospitality of God, respect the inherent dignity of our fellow humans, cast off the evils that possess us, and bring healing and hope. We can be of right mind.