

A Very Troubled Young Man

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1 Kings 19:1-15a, Psalm 42 and 43, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

We are told in the Gospel of Luke that one day, Jesus got into a boat with his disciples, and they sailed off and they landed on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee in a place called the country of the Gerasenes. Jesus was a stranger there, an outsider. But they had perhaps at least heard of him and the notoriety he was gaining on the other side of the lake.

I know that many communities, if they were visited by people who had a certain amount of celebrity, would generally make a point of ensuring that some of their leading citizens would be there to meet them and make sure that they got a good impression. That is why I think it is rather significant that the first person that Jesus met in that country was about the worst representative that you could imagine. He was greeted by a very troubled young man.

The Man who Met Jesus

It was a man who had a fraught relationship with things like clothing and with housing. He tended to walk around naked and had set up a homeless encampment in the local graveyard. What is more, the Gerasenes clearly weren't quite sure what to do with this man who caused no end of trouble. They had tried everything they could do as far as they were concerned, locking him up in chains and shackles and putting him under guard, but nothing prevented him from ruining their lives.

It makes me wonder. If Jesus were to come rowing up to the shores of our city, our society today, who could we imagine being the first one to go out and meet him? I could nominate a few people who would fit the bill. I'm sure it's not a coincidence either that just about everyone who comes to my mind is also a young man. Society seems to have a long history of troubled young men.

Who Would Meet Jesus Today?

So, who might Jesus meet as he came to shore? Perhaps the young man who, five years ago, walked into a mosque in Quebec City and began to gun down worshipers there. Perhaps it would be the self-proclaimed involuntarily celibate man who, two years ago, ran down eleven people with a van on the streets of Toronto.

Or, in light of more recent events, how could we fail to mention the man who felt so threatened by the mere existence of black people in his country that he drove over 300 km to find a majority black community in Buffalo so that he could kill as many of them as possible as they shopped in a grocery store. And how could we fail to mention the very troubled young man who celebrated his eighteenth birthday by purchasing two high-powered high-capacity rifles and using them to shoot up an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas?

The Reaction to Troubled Young Men

I believe that, in many ways, we today react to such young men much like the Gerasenes did. Oh,



we have tried all kinds of measures in order to prevent the devastation that they cause. We put them in chains, we lock them in shackles, we increase guards and security measures on every school and every other vulnerable place in our society. In some jurisdictions we put them to death.

But somehow it just keeps continuing to happen. Somehow another troubled young individual comes along sooner or later. And, while I agree that maybe taking a few steps towards making it harder for such troubled people to get their hands on highly effective and efficient killing machines, the truth of the matter is that even that is also treating a symptom and can only be a part of treating the underlying disease.

Jesus' Approach

But Jesus came along that day with a different focus than the local people. He wasn't there to punish this troubled young man. Jesus wasn't interested in band aid solutions to the problems that plague us. Jesus was a healer. He did not simply deal with the symptoms of the problem – the fear and the violence that the presence of this young man caused in the community. Jesus was always interested in dealing with the underlying issues. That is what true healing is all about, after all.

So, what did Jesus do when he came on the scene? First and foremost, he engaged the young man as he was. The first words of Jesus that are reported to us form a simple question. **“What is your name?”** he asks. But, as the answer makes clear, he is not asking the young man to identify himself. He is asking for the name of the demon that possesses him.

Demon Possession

And we should be careful to understand what that means according to the understanding of that time and place. I know that we usually assume that we understand what they meant back then when they spoke about demon possession. I mean, we have all seen movies like *The Exorcist*, *The Omen* and *Rosemary's Baby*. They have led us to believe that, those who believe in demon possession, always think of it as some sort of malevolent supernatural being that takes control of somebody's body.

Now, it is true that there were people in Jesus' time who believed that such things happened. But that is not the only kind of trouble that they described using the language of possession. You see, they understood most every ailment and trouble that people dealt with – including those we understand in medical terms – in exclusively spiritual terms.

Our Understanding is Different

We know that conditions like depression or addiction or anxiety disorders may have a whole host of medical, physiological, psychological and perhaps spiritual causes. Well, they only saw the spiritual causes of such things and so the only language they had to talk about them was spiritual language.

I don't think that they were completely wrong in their approach – there are spiritual dimensions to such problems. But I also believe that we can only bring true healing to someone who is struggling when we address the whole person – body, mind and spirit. And I believe that Jesus, in his healing activities, did understand that. So what was Jesus doing when he asked the name of what it was that was plaguing this man? He was demonstrating an openness to consider that whole person and what he was struggling with. And the answer that he received spoke volumes.

Not One Single Cause

“**Legion,**” the young man said. And that was, first and foremost, a clear acknowledgment that all he was struggling with could not be reduced to a single cause. The cause was legion. I know that that is always going to be the temptation when there are populations struggling in our society. We always want to find just one thing to blame it on: violent video games, broken families, drugs. There have even people who’ve tried to blame it on abortion or the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.

But you should be suspicious of any attempt to place the blame on one thing. It is almost never an attempt to come to terms with the real causes but rather an attempt to advance the speaker’s agenda and to keep everything else in society unchallenged and unchanged. The issues are always more complex. They are legion.

The Legions

“**Legion,**” the young man said. And I suspect that it was no mistake that he used the Latin term for the Roman troops that were occupying the whole territory. What were the legionaries there for if not to make sure that the people who were in charge remained in charge?

We are not told, of course, what events had led this young man to spiral into his violent and self-destructive way of life, but I think, given that his troubled mind went immediately to the word “legion,” it is very likely that the structure of his society, maintained by the legions, had something to do with it.

Structural Issues

And as we think of our troubled young people, we have to be willing to take into account the ways in which they have experienced a system that feels like it is stacked against them. They were raised in a world where it was considered normal to have active shooter drills in their schools – where they were taught to expect that there would be people who were trying to shoot them. They are living in a situation where few people like them have any reasonable path to afford their own home or have job security. They have lived their whole lives wondering whether the environment, as we have known it, is going to be able to maintain their population.

These are systemic problems and I realize that not every young individual will experience them in exactly the same way. Any one of these issues alone might not be an insurmountable problem, but when they are legion they do become overwhelming.

The Problem with Healing

The story of Jesus and this troubled young man is ultimately a very hopeful one because Jesus does bring healing to him. Jesus does this by addressing the whole person and that is what we need to do. But there is another aspect of this story that is rather troubling we need to face up to. We have to recognize that there is enormous resistance to that healing power in the story.

The story ends like this: **“Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind... Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.”**

Now how does that make sense? Here they have feared this man and the havoc he has caused for a long time. But now that Jesus has apparently eliminated this terrible issue, they are upset and they want him gone. Why, it is almost as if they do not like the fact that this man has found some healing.

Healing Disrupts

I believe that that is exactly what is going on because, in order for this man to find healing, the system that was at work in that community had to be disrupted. How else can we understand the destruction of the entire herd of pigs being necessary to the healing? There is no question that such a destruction would have dealt a savage blow to the local economy.

But there is more to it than that, something systemic. People have long wondered why there might have been such a large pork industry in that region. I mean, they weren't raising hogs in order to sell to the Jewish population, so who were they selling to?

They must have been selling to the foreign occupying troops. They must have been selling to the legions. Yes, they were dependent on the industrial military complex for their local economy. They were deeply embedded in a system that relied on everything remaining exactly the way it was. And the way that Jesus had healed this man had demonstrated to them that his healing required a disruption of that system. So, yes, of course they wanted Jesus out of there.

Why we Don't Fix Things

And that is precisely the problem with where we are when it comes to dealing with this never-ending crop of troubled young men who are wreaking havoc in our society. Healing is possible; something better is possible. The problem is that such healing will only come with our willingness to change the systems that are maintaining this *status quo*. And there are certain powers in our society, very influential powers who profit enormously from the way that things are set up right now, who are dead set on making sure that that doesn't happen. They won't hesitate to run the healer out of town.

So there we are; that is the challenge that is before us. But let me just say that the hope presented in this story is real. Jesus did bring healing to that young man because he didn't care about how much it cost. And when troubled people of any age and any gender encounter people who have that kind of sense of priority, I really do believe that healing is not only possible, it is nearly inevitable. It is a question of priorities and it is a question of us being willing to engage people with a compassion and a level of commitment that knows that there are things that are more important than just maintaining things the way that they have always been. Such disruption, in fact, has always been very much at the heart of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God