

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 12 (Proper 7) (C-RCL) June 23, 2019

Isaiah 65:1-9; Psalm 22:19-28; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39
University Lutheran Church, Cambridge MA; Imogene A. Stulken
Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Kenya, Tanzania

One of my dear friends is a professional organizer. Several years ago, I invited her to my place where I tried on every single piece of my clothing that was hanging in the various closets around the house. She asked helpful questions, such as, “Do you love this?” or “Does this have sentimental value for you?” She offered honest comments and suggestions that were delivered in such a kind and thoughtful way that I could hear and accept them; for example: “If you’re not sure about keeping something, put it into a box in the garage; then, after a year if you haven’t worn it, you could donate it.” (One thing was certain: I wasn’t going to run out of clothes to wear any time soon!)

Fast forward to the present: If I *really* want to see my friend’s eyes light up, all I have to do is say, “E-mail inbox. Would you like to work on my e-mail inbox?” (She organizes e-mail inboxes as well as closets!) With 101,304 messages, and with 863 MB left of an allotted 10 GB, my inbox needs help! When I was searching for something early last week, I discovered that there were 80 messages from “MAILER-DAEMON” telling me that a message was “undeliverable”. Add that to the fact that I get umpty-ump messages a day that are solicitations or advertisements, one might even say that my e-mail is *demon-possessed!*

The “DAEMON” of “MAILER-DAEMON” is spelled “d-A-e-m-o-n”, an alternate spelling of “demon” – d-e-m-o-n. Both spellings are pronounced “DEE-muhn”, although d-a-e-m-o-n is sometimes pronounced “DAY-muhn,” (which I’ll use from now on here so as not to confuse the two.) The term “daemon” was coined in the 1960s by the programmers of MIT’s Project MAC for background processes that are always available as needed.

Many people equate the word “daemon” with the word “demon”, implying some kind of satanic connection between UNIX and the underworld. This is [a] ... misunderstanding. “Daemon” is actually a much older form of “demon”; daemons have no particular bias towards good or evil, but rather serve to

help define a person's character or personality. The ancient Greeks' concept of a "personal daemon" was similar to the modern concept of a "guardian angel"—*eudaemonia* is the state of being helped or protected by a kindly spirit.

A further characterization of the mythological symbolism is that a daemon is something which is not visible yet is always present and working its will.

[[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daemon_\(computing\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daemon_(computing)), accessed 6.18.2019]

Today's Gospel reading is rather eerily bizarre with its story of a man possessed by demons. The man's demons, always present, are certainly *not* guardian angels; rather they work their will as destructive and isolating forces.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the founder and, until July of 2018, the pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints, an ELCA congregation in Denver, Colorado. She is described as "[t]attooed, angry, and profane." [Inside left hand book jacket] (I have seen her tats of the liturgical year on her arms.) In her book *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, she reflects on the story in today's Gospel:

I don't always know what to do with texts about demons in the Bible. Especially when those demons talk and have names.

....

But I do know that, like myself, many of my parishioners suffer from addictions and compulsions and depression. I do know that sometimes things get ahold of us, making us do things we don't want to or making us think we love things (substances, people, etc.) that are really destructive. So maybe if, in part, that is what having a demon is, maybe if it's being taken over by something destructive, then possession really is less of an anachronism and more of an epidemic. [Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, New York, NY: Convergent Books, © 2015 by Nadia Bolz-Weber, p. 85]

Jesus arrives at the "country of the Gerasenes" and steps "out on land". In the paragraph preceding our text, we learn that Jesus and the disciples are in a boat crossing to the other side of the lake. While they are

sailing, Jesus falls asleep. A windstorm sweeps down on them, the boat is filling with water, and they are in danger for their lives. The disciples wake Jesus up, shouting over the wind, “Master, Master, we are perishing.” Jesus wakes up, rebukes the wind and “raging waves”. And there is a calm. (I note parenthetically that there is a painting in the office by He Qi – the person who painted the scene on the banner behind the altar that is called “Peace, Be Still.” I invite you to check it out.) Jesus says to them, “Where is your faith?” Note their reaction: They are *afraid* and amazed, and say to one another, “Who then is this who commands even the winds and the water, and they obey?” [Luke 8:22-25]

The disciples ask, “Who is this?”, not sure yet what to make of Jesus. But as soon as Jesus steps out on land, he is met by a man with demons – who *does* know who Jesus is. Seeing Jesus, the man falls down before him and shouts at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” (By naming Jesus, did the demons think to have power over Jesus the way they held power over the man?) Perhaps you’ve heard this naming of Jesus before. It harkens back to the first chapter of Luke and the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel says to Mary, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High ...” [Luke 1:30-32a, NRSV]

The man with the demons has worn no clothes for a long time; he lives not in a house, but in the tombs – a place of uncleanness. The demons (also referred to here as just “demon” or as “an unclean spirit”) would often seize the man; he would break the chains and shackles meant to restrain him (as a protection both for himself and the community?); sometimes he would be driven by the demons into the wilds.

We pause here to note that this past Thursday, June 20th, was the United Nations’ World Refugee Day. The 2019 theme was “#StepWithRefugees — Take A Step on World Refugee Day”. The day challenged everyone “to join together and take a step with refugees.” [<https://www.un.org/en/events/refugeeday/>, accessed 6.16.2019] The demons of extreme weather, poverty, violence, and brutal war with its devastation, are forcing millions to flee from their homes. On its Web site, the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) shares several stories “behind the miles” that people have traveled. Here’s one story:

When armed forces reached her village [in South Sudan] and began attacking her family, Eva was forced to flee alone. Nine-year-old Eva walked for six days, alone, until she reached a town on the Ethiopian border. There, a woman helped her and gave her shoes and clothes. She also gave Eva money so that she could cross the river to Ethiopia, and finally reach safety. When Eva reached the safety of Ethiopia, she walked to the Tirgol transit center, where she and other refugees received food, a sleeping mat, shelter, water and a jerry can from UNHCR. After five days at the transit center, UNHCR protection officers transferred Eva to the Nguennyiel refugee camp where she would have access to better shelter, medical care and importantly, school. [<https://stepwithrefugees.org/en-us/stories/>, accessed 6.16.2019]

All together it took Eva 12 days to walk these 250 miles.

Eighty years ago this month, in 1939, “Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) was founded by Lutheran churches in the United States to serve uprooted people during World War II.”

[<https://www.lirs.org/history/>] (At this time, 1 in 6 refugees was Lutheran. [*Living Lutheran*, June 2019, 36-37, p. 36]) Since 1939, LIRS “has welcomed more than 500,000 refugees and migrants.”

[https://www.lirs.org/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI4OTsxvfx4gIVUI8NCh0N6ACWEAAYA SAAEgLeJPD_BwE] “LIRS has since grown into an internationally recognized leader known for innovative services for refugees, asylum-seekers, unaccompanied migrant children and families, migrants in detention, and other vulnerable populations.” [<https://www.lirs.org/history/>]

The June issue of *Living Lutheran* lists some ideas for responding to the refugee crisis and for welcoming our neighbors. One suggested action is to call legislators and say you favor higher refugee admissions than the current cap of 30,000 a year. (In comparison, Canada is set to welcome approximately 330,000 refugees this year.) Another action is to be a bridge builder by being kind to people who are from a different part of our world. “They may have been through challenges [we] can only begin to

comprehend.” [Michael Rinehart, “Why the ELCA welcomes refugees,” *Living Lutheran*, June 2019, 36-37, p. 37]

Notice that the man with the demons doesn’t ask Jesus for healing. Instead, he asks Jesus – in a loud voice, “What have you to do with me?” The demon begs Jesus not to torment him. That’s a bit ironic, isn’t it? – seeing as how the demons have been tormenting the man “for a long time”. [Luke 8:27] Now it’s Jesus’ turn to ask a question: “What is your name?”

The answer given is “Legion” – which isn’t so much a name as a number. “Many” demons indeed! In imperial Rome, a legion was a unit of the Roman army, consisting of between 5,200 and 6,000 soldiers!

At a time in her life when Nadia Bolz-Weber’s depression was so present and felt like a character, she gave it the name Frances. Frances stopped by in Nadia’s teens and early twenties. When she found herself beginning to like the same things that Frances liked – “booze, emotionally unstable boyfriends, self-destruction” – Frances moved in, turning Nadia’s “studio apartment into a Wilderness.” [Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, New York, NY: Convergent Books, © 2015 by Nadia Bolz-Weber, p. 86]

Nadia notes that it is the demons “who always recognize Jesus’s authority.” So she started wondering:

If Jesus rowed up in his boat while I was in the throes of another roommate situation with my demon Frances, and I were to say to him, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” would Jesus say, “Oh, me? I have nothing to do with you”? Of course not. That’s why the demons are afraid. Because Jesus always has something to do with them.

[She continues:] Which is exactly why our demons try to keep us from people who remind us how loved we are. Our demons want nothing to do with the love of God in Christ Jesus because it threatens to obliterate them, and so they try to isolate us and tell us that we are not worthy to be called children of God. And those are lies that Jesus does not abide. [Nadia Bolz-

Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, New York, NY: Convergent Books, © 2015 by Nadia Bolz-Weber, p. 87]

The demons beg Jesus not to send them to the abyss – which may mean the abode of the dead or the “watery deep” – that “cosmic sea under the earth, the symbol of chaos and disorder conquered by the creator.”

[Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to Luke i-IX* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981), 44. “The Gerasene Demoniac (8:16-39), note 31, p. 739] Instead, demons ask to be sent into the large herd of swine (also known as *pigs*) feeding on a hillside nearby. Jesus gives permission; the demons come out of the man and enter the swine. The herd then *rushes* down the steep bank into the lake and drowns. These animals deemed unclean (that is, they would not be eaten by observant Jews) – these pigs become the vehicles through which the demons are destroyed.

One commentator asks: “Is Jesus not presented here as cruel to animals? How could he have caused the owners of the pigs such a financial loss ...? The commentator then responds: “Obviously, such questions miss the point of the gospel-story itself, being recounted for a symbolic and religious purpose.” [Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to Luke i-IX* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981), 44. “The Gerasene Demoniac (8:16-39), note 31, p. 734]

I note here that this story was used by classical theological commentators “to argue that animals have no moral importance in Christianity”! Did you know that Augustine of Hippo declared that the story showed that “there are no common rights between us and the beasts and trees” and that we have no duties toward animals? Or did you know that Thomas Aquinas concluded that the destruction of the pigs showed that Jesus’ purpose was primarily for the good of human souls, “not their bodies or property (including their animals)”?!? [“Exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exorcism_of_the_Gerasene_demoniac, accessed 6.18.2019]

The swineherds run off and spread the word “in the city and in the country” what has happened. The people come out to see for themselves what has happened. They find the man – whom no one could control – now sitting at the feet of Jesus, “clothed and in his right mind.” [Luke 8:35, NRSV] Their reaction? They are afraid. When witnesses tell the others that

the man possessed by demons has been healed, that he has been saved, that he has been made whole, the people are now seized with *great fear*. As the disciples were earlier afraid at Jesus' power over natural, physical forces, the Gerasenes now fear Jesus' power over internal, spiritual forces – and they – quite understandably, really – they ask Jesus to leave.

The man begs to be allowed to “be with Jesus,” but Jesus sends him back into community to declare how much God has done for him. So – quite courageously, I think – the man does go away back into a community, whose livelihood has been destroyed, declaring how much *Jesus* has done for him. Jesus' acts are thus understood as the acts of God. [Staff et al., “Studying the Lectionary,” June 24, 2001, Pentecost 3, Proper 7, *Homily Service*, Vol. 34, No. 3, The Liturgical Conference, © 2001, p. 50]

“So,” asks Nadia:

So are demons forces that are totally external to us who seek to defy God? Are they just the shadow side of our own souls? Are they social constructions from a premodern era? Bottom line: Who cares? I don't think demons are something human reason can put its finger on. Or that human faith can resolve. I just know that demons, whether they be addictions or actual evil spirits, are not what Jesus wants for us, since basically every time he encounters them he tells them to piss off. [Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, New York, NY: Convergent Books, © 2015 by Nadia Bolz-Weber, pp. 88-89]

Did you notice the thread of clothing that is woven throughout the sermon? A friend helps me sort through my clothes closets; a woman at the Ethiopian border gives young Eva shoes and clothes; a man formerly outcast and possessed by a legion of demons sits at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. To this we add what Paul writes to the Galatians in today's Second Reading that “in Christ Jesus [we] are all children of God through faith. As many of [us] as were baptized into Christ have clothed [our]selves with Christ.” [Galatians 3:26-27, NRSV] And so, may we take heart in the words of the 14th-century anchoress Julian of Norwich: “Our good Lord is our clothing that, for love, wraps us up and winds us about, embracing us, all beclosing us and hanging about us, for tender love.” [Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. James Walsh, p.

53 cited in Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, © 2002 Augsburg Fortress, p. 93.] May we indeed feel that tender love embracing us and holding us close.