

“UP AGAINST DEMONS,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas at St. Paul United Church of Christ, October 9, 2022

This morning we have as our gospel lesson an incredible healing story. (*Luke 8:26-39*) On the road in his itinerant ministry, Jesus crosses over from his native province of Galilee into a foreign region known as Gerasee, perhaps to take a quick shortcut on his way to other places. Although Jesus has no plans to minister to the local inhabitants, who are non-Jews, he is unexpectedly called upon to do. Specifically, one very crazy man accosts him and does so boldly.

Ironically, while Jesus is like “a prophet without honor in own country” back home in Galilee among his family and fellow Nazarenes, there is no recognition problem on the part of this crazy man of Gerasee. Without having met Jesus before, he spontaneously addresses him as the “son of the Most Holy God.” However, it may not be the man who is really speaking. It turns out that the crazy, demented fellow is possessed by demons—indeed, as scripture reports, a whole “legion” of them. By Roman reckoning and count of a legion, this amounts to six thousand devilish spirits. Moreover, the demons are so in control of the man that he is little more than their mouthpiece.

Pathetically, these demonic spirits generate so much frenzy for the poor man that he can’t stay still or keep any clothes on. For as long as anyone can remember, he has been wandering completely naked at the local graveyard, a place where folks of ancient times believed that demons most liked to dwell. Even efforts to chain the crazy man down for his own good have proved vain. With the kinetic energy generated by the demons within him this possessed man has broken loose from his fetters every time.

Now most people seeing the crazy man would simply flee. After all, you never know what a crazy man is going to do. But Jesus doesn’t run from the man’s presence. Quite the contrary, with his heart full of compassion he steps forward to heal this man of his demonic affliction.

Apparently, the demons besetting this man realize right off that they may be meeting their match. Rather than combatting Jesus directly, they try to dupe or outwit him by striking some kind of bargain. If they are to be exorcised from the crazy man they currently inhabit, as Jesus obviously intends, they ask Jesus to cast them into a herd of local swine or pigs. Their goal is to survive in somebody or something so that they can continue to raise hellish havoc and mischief in the world.

Jesus complies with the demons’ wish. But, perhaps as Jesus foresaw, it’s a bad calculation on the part of the demons. No sooner are the demons cast into the pigs than the whole herd goes wild. Dashing over a hillside into the Sea of Galilee, the swine drown. That’s the end of the legion of demons too. The crazy man is no longer crazed but cured. And he is quick to sing Jesus’ praises to everyone who has ears to hear.

Unfortunately, the local townspeople are not disposed to stand and up and cheer for either Jesus or their once demon-besieged cemetery resident. However impressed, they are very, very angry. In losing the herd of swine for the sake of a crazy man's healing, the town has taken a huge financial hit. In collective fury, the swine-keepers drive Jesus from their town. It's almost a miracle that Jesus eludes their grasp and escapes physically unscathed.

Congregation, I rather like this story. Indeed, I like it very much. For me the story dramatically underscores the greatness of Jesus. As the son of God, he is not only able to calm the seas, as he once did with his apostles. He is also capable of taming some of most troubled human souls or psyches. That's good news for our day because there are still a lot of troubled souls around. In fact, in our presents when we are not infrequently experiencing mass shootings and demented riots against authority, there seems to be more craziness than ever.

Of course, in the twenty-first century we have gotten very sophisticated in talking about our problems when they arise. Often pushing religion aside, modern science has spawned the development of psychiatry and psychology as so-calling "helping professions" and medicalized all human discontent. Indeed, more often than not, "craziness" in all its manifestations is now attributed to genetics or chemical imbalances rather than demon possession. Whom I am to challenge such medical explanations for human distress? In certain forms of mental illness, human biochemistry arising from genetics or environmental causes may play a huge role. But I still believe that a lot of the hysteria and misery besetting the human race today does reflect profound soul problems, not unlike those which Jesus confronted many times over in his ministry among those believed to be demon-possessed.

Although not many people may have cause to remember the fact anymore, the very terms *psychiatry* and *psychology* have root origins in the Greek word *psyche*, meaning *soul*. Likewise, the "iatry" in psychiatry comes from Greek word for healing. Thus, psychiatry literally means *soul-healing*. And what about the "ology" of psychology? Translated from Latin into English *ology* means "study of" or "discipline of." Consequently, put together the word *psychology* literally means *study of the soul*. As originally conceived in another age, the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology were all about soul study and soul healing which are also concerns for our Christian faith life together as underscored by the healing scenes of the Bible.

Amid our church life today, we casually do speak about the different spirits that animate us and guide our dispositions and souls. Indeed, in common parlance, we often talk about the "better angels of our nature," as well as the demons that can come to possess us. For me, these are no mere figures of speech. Although I have difficulty regarding either angels or the devil as actual existent beings in the same way that God is or that you and I are, I do

believe in the presence and power of angelic and demonic forces. And I also believe that as men and women we can give ourselves over to these angelic or demonic forces, making them very real presences in our daily lives. A demonic force is anything that lends itself to human destruction and despair. Conversely, angelic forces encourage us to lead lives that are loving and constructive—in tune with everything that Jesus taught.

Unfortunately, demonic temptations abound. Look at the distractions that lead men and women morally and spiritually astray, undercutting any wholesome and positive life. Pursued as if they offered the promise of salvation, sex, drugs, alcohol, gambling, greed, and brute violence are ruining the lives of people all around us.

Reading the newspaper, turning on the television, or going online is certainly not something for the faint-hearted to do. The mess and chaos of everyday life are incredible. Last year saw a 28.5 per cent jump in opioid-related deaths across the United States with very real prospects here and worldwide for an “exponential growth” in loss of life, according to *Lancet*, a respected British medical journal. Heroin addictions, which have quadrupled since 2010, are once more accelerating with usage increasing among all age groups, starting at twelve years old, as reported by the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics. Likewise, ending a two-year decline in America, suicide rates in 2021 and 2022 have picked up again, climbing 4 per cent annually, perhaps influenced by the prolonged isolation resulting from the Covid pandemic. White males between the ages of 24 and 64 in rural areas seem to be the most susceptible to suicide’s lure.

If all this isn’t depressing enough, mass shootings are definitely on the upswing once more. Between January and August 2022, there were seventy mass shootings, leaving 71 dead and 255 wounded. However, in September 2022 alone, there 68 mass shootings, killing 55 people and wounding another 223 persons. Sadly, we have almost become blasé about such violence that only very worst incidence of it captures our attention.

Although the heroin usage I just cited crosses all color lines, the increased opioid addictions, suicides, and mass shootings predominately involve white folks and more men than women. Sociologists analyzing these statistics suspect that this is due to the fact that white Americans are no longer as communally connected as our nation’s minorities—black, brown, or yellow—who, as a matter of choice, seem to have maintained stronger extended family bonds, as well as greater church ties and support, which helps them cope with trauma better. Less individuality and more communality, especially grounded in the teachings of Jesus, helps our minorities better fend off and keep at bay what can be fairly called the demons of frustration, depression, and despair.

I think that the sociologists trying to interpreting and explain the date on addiction and violence are exactly right. Christian faith and church-going do make a difference in our quest for a hopeful and meaningful life. And this is true regardless of our color. This was

already evident a couple of decades ago to Dr. Harold G. Koenig, director of Duke University's Center for the study of Religion, Spirituality, and Health. A dedicated researcher in his own right, he observed that at least six hundred studies from the 1990s and through the first years of the new millennium showed that "a religious person has greater well-being, greater satisfaction with life, less depression, less anxiety, lower suicide rate, is more hopeful and optimistic, has less cardiovascular disease, lower blood pressure, and lives longer." (*Dallas Morning News*, November 8, 2003) "That's the bottom line," Koenig added. Congregation, that's a bottom line that no one should ignore.

Happily, just as Jesus relieved the crazy man of Gerasee of his demons, he, now resurrected and working through the grace of the Holy Spirit, continues to exorcize the demons of any and all who believe and trust him in today. Offering us forgiveness for our sins, he empowers us to be more honest with ourselves and others about those darker dimensions of our psyches that need to be brought to the light where they can be either mastered or appropriately channeled. Furthermore, providing his own life as an example of spiritual integrity, Jesus instructs us in the moral values that can help us to recognize and say no to all destructive temptations and impulses, present and future.

Although it's a fact not always appreciated, morality and spirituality go hand in hand together. Those with a good moral compass are more likely to feel spiritually balanced too with an appropriate sense of boundaries in even the most intimate human relationships. And those who are spiritually balanced are less likely to become neurotic or psychotic. By remaining attuned to the truth and wisdom which God imparts, and remaining spiritually and emotionally connected with Jesus and the community of the faithful who trust in him, we can often preempt the need for any dramatic exorcism and perhaps the expense of more privately outing demons in the clinical office of a psychiatrist or psychologist.

Today, a cynical and skeptical world at large which honors atheism more than faith may want to stereotype all religious people as crazed and irrational fanatics. But the reality is quite different—at least among Christ's disciples. Time and again, the thoughtful, faithful, and committed Christians I know stand out as among the sanest, most sensible, and healthiest people to be found. As Christians, we shouldn't take Jesus or the blessings of his church for granted. Because we have Jesus and his living body to help us deal with any demons, we have the opportunity to be better, healthier people with a sense of purpose in life. This is good news for us. This is good news for others that we should share.

As our own St. Paul church motto has proclaimed for three decades: *Churched people have a better chance.* Let's make the most of what Jesus makes possible for all men and women who have faith. **Amen.**