

**“One Little Word Can Fell Him”
Luke 8:26-39**

Recent events in Orlando remind us of the fact that evil is not out of date or out of style, it has not exceeded its shelf life or recommended sell by date. 100 killed or maimed in the name of Allah was a powerful wake up call. Listening to the survivors describe their harrowing ordeal was horrifying. And, the thought of the shooter walking among the dead and dying, laughing, posting on Facebook, and making 16 telephone calls only added to the surreal scene. Whether you emphasize the terrorist ideology, the hatred of the patrons at the club, or the prevalence of guns – hatred, evil, and fear were on display. But, we don't even need such distant drama. Nightly news reports on ch 15, 21, and 33 should be enough to convince us that evil is alive and flourishing, right here in Fort Wayne.

Today's Gospel text deals with fear and evil. The text is full of it: the out-of-his-mind demonized man, the terrified demons begging for a break, the townspeople wanting to be rid of Jesus. But, in the midst of all of the evil and fear, our text proclaims that the devil and demons, evil and fear, do not get the last word. And, if we want to know how to deal with fear and evil in our world and in us today, we can learn something from Luke 8.

When you read the Bible, it is always a good idea to look for the meaning in the map or the sermon in the scenery. Our narrative begins with Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee. The lake is a good sized one by Indiana standards, 8 miles wide by 13 miles long and up to 141 feet deep. At 686 feet below sea level, it is the lowest freshwater lake on Earth. But, that is not the important truth here. This represents Jesus leaving Jewish territory for a place predominately Gentile. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke employ different names because this area, the so-called Ten Cities, was variously referred to by people, either by the tiny village near the lake where the action took place (Gergesha, Kursi) or by one of the two larger cities that dominated the area of Gadara or Gerasa (Jerash). In any case, the point Luke is driving at is that Jesus crossed over into Gentile territory.

When they go onto the beach they encounter a man possessed by demons. Having tamed a wild sea, Jesus now tames a wild man. The power of the evil at work inside of him is further highlighted by how unsuccessful all of the attempts were to contain him. As one author writes, “The destructive power of the demonic on this man could hardly be portrayed more strikingly. Completely displaced from his community, living among the tombs, he might as well be dead.” Here, in an area of unclean people (Gentiles), he finds a crazed man with extraordinary strength inhabited by unclean spirits, living naked among the unclean tombs (scarcely even human), next to a bunch of unclean Jews(?) violating the Old Testament cleanliness laws by raising 2,000 unclean animals. You can almost imagine the fear and loathing on the part of the disciples as they accompany Jesus.

One of the church fathers, Cyril of Alexandria, noted: “In great misery and nakedness, he wandered among the graves of the dead. He was in utter wretchedness, leading a disgraceful life. He was a proof of the cruelty of the demons and a plain demonstration of their impurity.... Whoever they possess and subject to their power, at once they make him an example of great misery, deprived of every blessing, destitute of all sobriety, and entirely deprived even of reason.”

But, in the Bible evil does not get the last word, God does. And, by inquiring of his name, Jesus demonstrates his authority over the devil and his minions. “Legion” represented 5,000 to 6,000 Roman soldiers, the sharp end of the spear for enforcing Roman cruelty and domination, a symbol of evil and a source of immense fear for all who encountered them.

The reaction by Legion, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me” reflects the idiom, “what to me and to you?” and carries the twin senses of defensive hostility and disengagement much like our “Leave me alone!” There is fear of Jesus, fear knowing that their ultimate destiny is certain, without any possibility of parole. They beg and bargain for a stay of sentence.

The demons are destructive: They were destroying the man. They would soon destroy the pigs. They destroy whatever they touch. The point was to take demonic influence seriously, as well as Jesus' power over it as a picture of the larger battle for human souls. There would be no doubt how the man's transformation had taken place.

We do not typically see evil manifested so crudely. Few sinners show the extreme symptoms of the demoniac, but inwardly, they are all in bondage to the devil. Most of the time, evil is more smooth and sophisticated, politely cunning,

and calculating. But since our first parents rebelled against God, evil and sin is always associated with outcomes that are destructive of persons and families. Just as the demons had destroyed this man's social network and were working effectively to disintegrate his mind and soul, social and personal evil, sin if you will, estranges us from God and destroys our relationships with ourselves and others today.

Jesus commands the demons to leave the man. Luke's summary of the man's prior condition and his outline of his condition following the encounter:

a man had many demons (Lk 8:27) // the demons had gone from the man (Lk 8:35); he had worn no clothes (Lk 8:27) // he was clothed (Lk 8:35); he did not live in a house but in the tombs (Lk 8:27) // return to your home (Lk 8:39); he fell down before him and shouted (Lk 8:28) // he was sitting at the feet of Jesus (Lk 8:35); the demon seized him and he was out of control (Lk 8:29) // he was in his right mind (Lk 8:35)

And, in an act of kindness even to his mortal enemies, he grants their urgent request to be permitted to enter the swine. And, as if to give a powerful object lesson to what evil does when left to its own devices, it destroys the pigs by driving them into the lake to drown, horrifying the pig farmers and causing a great fear to fall upon the villagers who beg Jesus to leave.

Notice the role of fear that connects to evil. The demons are afraid, the man was afraid, the townspeople are afraid. And, take note of who is not afraid: Jesus calmly acts in the midst of the fear in an act of love he drives out fear. Ultimately, we will either "fear God" in the Old Testament sense of falling before him in repentance and worship or we will be consumed by fear, a fear that will destroy us.

Theologian Russell Moore recently reminded us that "any Christian witness that doesn't start and finish with the gospel is unspeakably cruel and, in fact, devilish." The devil works in two principal ways: Deception and Accusation. In Genesis 3, the original lie was "Has God really said?" and "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). Casting doubt upon the truth of God's Word and his loving care for us works! But, in addition to deception, he also excels at accusation, "who accuses them day and night before our God" (Rev. 12:10).

Satan prefers to convince some people that they have no need to repent and others that it will do them no good. As Moore notes, "Some people are deceived into thinking they are too good for the gospel while others are accused into thinking they are too bad for the gospel." In one telling observation, theologian Moore observes that, "No one is more pro-choice than the devil on the way into the abortion clinic, and no one is more pro-life than the devil on the way out of the abortion clinic. The gospel of Jesus Christ tears down both strategies."

Jesus does not commend morality to the man freed from demons. The devil does not fear morality. In fact, he will use it when it serves his purposes: to bolster foolish pride in one's ability to eradicate sin in our lives by our own "try harder" efforts and to become self-righteous scolds looking down our noses at those less righteous than we are. This is the problem of the Pharisee in Luke 18 who felt ever so superior to the sinful tax collector. The devil understood that all of the morality in the world could not dismantle his kingdom. In fact, by driving us to despair or plumping our pride, it might actually serve his demonic goals.

When Jesus went about healing folks in the Gospel, he brought forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins defeats evil. Forgiveness of sins casts out evil, breaking its grip and stranglehold. Forgiveness of sins allows us to avoid either the self-righteous reaction of the Pharisee smugly boasting in Luke 18 or the crushing sense of failure that simply causes the sinner to turn back to the momentary pleasures of sin for a bit of respite from his misery. By the way, that is the reason why a "try harder" morality does not work in solving our problems. It merely makes us feel worse when we inevitably fail, causing us to reach out for a fix that will not satisfy (cf. dieting, alcoholism, compulsive texting disorder, phubbing, or any other addictive behavior).

Only the Gospel can undo the work of the devil. All of the bloodless moralism in the world does not faze him. He has nothing to fear but the bloody sacrifice that was Jesus on the cross. Luke introduced us to this man as displaced, alienated from home and city ([Luke 8:27](#)). Now Jesus returns him to his home and gives him an assignment within his city. He emerges a healed man, not only physically and mentally, but in terms of his community and vocation. He is restored to his community and given a commission. Jesus hardly left the beach, but he left a powerful beachhead for the kingdom. Mark tells us of the aftermath when he writes: "And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled" (Mk 5:20).

The man asks Jesus to permit him to become a disciple and travel with them. Jesus says no. This serves as a great encouragement: “yes” does not always imply a good thing and “no” does not always equal disfavor. Jesus sends him out with a divine commission: ***“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him.*** He does not send the man out to be good, to try harder, or to clean up his act. No. He sends him out with the Gospel, God's answer to evil. 1 John 3 reminds us, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” The Gospel is powerful enough to effect our liberation. Whenever the law convicts us of our sin and wretchedness, driving us to repentance, the Gospel declares that we are forgiven, absolved, liberated, freeing us from the devil and his works. The only ones who have a right to be afraid are those unwilling to repent of their sins and receive his forgiving pardon.

The message of the text today is clear: The cross of Christ has meaning for both Jew and Gentile. The good news must be joyfully proclaimed to all people regardless of color, language, nationality, or creed. The word of God's forgiveness has the power to banish the devil from hearts and lives, so that Christ may enter in. That is what this text is all about.

500 years ago a Christian leader struggled with the devil and evil in this world. Some have thought that he was too obsessed with the devil, too quick to jump to the conclusion that someone was personally following him around, tormenting him and seducing him into sin. I prefer to think that Martin Luther understood, far more realistically than we do today, that the “world, the flesh, and the devil” are an integrated system. The world will lead us to do what seems right to us, sophisticated, proper, even moralistic. The old Adam clings to our flesh like super glue and keeps warring with us so that Paul could say that *“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate”* (Rom 7). Finally, whether the devil or his demons, evil uses both the world and the flesh to defeat us. So, sometime before 1529 he put into words the truths he learned from Scripture about the battle. Then, 500 years ago this week, June 25, 1530, when his followers marched into Augsburg to present their confession before the Emperor, they sang his words: “A mighty Fortress is our God, A trusty Shield and Weapon; He helps us free from every need That hath us now o'ertaken.

The old evil Foe Now means deadly woe; Deep guile and great might Are his dread arms in fight; On Earth is not his equal ... Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us. We tremble not, we fear no ill, They shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none, He's judged; the deed is done; One little word can fell him.”

Rev. Dennis McFadden