



One in Christ Jesus
Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (June 19, 2022)

In today's gospel, the disciples sail across the lake and upon their arrival to the region opposite to Galilee, a wild looking man approaches them, and Jesus alone steps out of the boat and meets him. The night crossing has been quite dramatic as a storm develops and the disciples, terrified, wake Jesus up, who in turn rebukes the wind and calms the storm. The disciples are already shaken by this experience and don't need more excitement. No wonder they opt for not stepping ashore when the strange man walks toward them.

The story is about a collective group of unclean spirits abusing a man, who is unclothed and unsheltered. He is frequently bound in chains by his own people who don't know what to do with him. Were they ashamed of him, an outcast and violated spirit, a wild person led into the wilds? The only way that he could be kept under control, they thought, was to keep him in chains. Apparently, they have tried this solution several times to no avail. The definition of insanity, according to Albert Einstein, is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Ernest Becker's classic, *The Denial of Death*, explores how fear of death drives all human behavior, from fear and anxiety to various forms of dependency and dysfunctions.

The reference to the possessed man breaking away from chains only to dwell among the dead, perhaps in contemplation of one's finitude, or perhaps in self-commiseration and despair, is a very appropriate image.

How many of us have gone through critical times when we felt so overwhelmed and downcast and sought out a quiet place to sulk and commiserate? On the other hand, how many people would we like to lock up and throw away the key? How many people do we treat as unapproachable and unwanted? Is there anyone we'd rather keep at a safe distance and stay away from?

The daemon(s) is (are) tormenting the man but begs Jesus not to torment him (them). Yet, Jesus comes into the abode of the dead and liberates the tormented man. Interesting how evil feels free to violate others but finds a way to turn things around and play the victim using the very argument it is opposed with.

Jesus asks the daemon(s) to reveal its name. This follows the ancient belief that to know someone's name, their true identity, was to have power over them. The answer comes swiftly: legions. The Roman legion was the largest military unit of the Roman army and could count as many as 5800 soldiers. The implication is that the spirits are like an armed force. The Roman legions were a huge psychological and physical affliction for the people. Could it be that the social oppression that the foreign military power was imposing was having a huge psychological

impact on the life of people? There is also a cosmic warfare unfolding –it’s never just this or that conflict that ails individuals and entire societies, but the powers battling it out through us and history. For Jesus and the man, the 'unclean spirit(s)' or 'demon(s)' are an occupying force who have no rightful place in the man's life, and Jesus' deliverance of him fulfills Zachariah's prophecy about the savior who has come “to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days.” (Luke 1:74-75).

How important is it to give a name to the evil we see? When we are able to name what ails us, we create the conditions to engage it from a known and shared reality and to begin a healing process. One can't change what one doesn't know and understand. One can't change what one *doesn't want* to know or understand. The more we deny, dismiss, or distort reality, the harder we fasten the shackles that bind us, and the longer it takes to face the truth and initiate the healing process.

We need to ask and wrestle with a very hard question from which we keep running away: How much damage has slavery done, not just to the enslaved but to the soul of America? Do you think we can understand and find a solution to what ails our society, namely unjust institutions and especially white supremacy unless we wrestle with that?

The spiritual and theological insights of the letter of Paul to the Galatians (3:27-29) can be of great help to create the foundation to a more just society.

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

Paul's insight is part of many churches' values statements, ours included. We are moved by it and appeal to it when we speak of the unity Jesus has come to create. Do we really mean what we say? Are we truly as hospitable as we say we are? Or do we embrace diversity as long as it doesn't touch us? What social dynamics are at work? If we claim a Christian identity, how is that manifested in the way we relate to others?

It seems to me that Paul, involved as he was in his love relationship with God, could see what Jesus was talking about when he encouraged a spiritual life in God. In theory, there should be nothing that separates us from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39), nothing that should come between God and us and one another. All are invited by grace through faith into that unity of Spirit with the Godhead, with one another, and with Jesus. The Communion of Saints happens through Jesus. We should all be recipients of God's love, and all Christians should be like unblocked arteries that allow love to flow freely. If anything is blocking the arteries, then how can there be a free flow of love? Something has caused those arteries to be blocked. Something needs to be done about it. God, who is pure Love, cannot but give that love away. If love is not circulating, we are blocking that love.

Often, it is our fears, our prejudices, and our cultural bias that cause the free flow of love to be obstructed and, at times, even blocked. Sometimes, we manifest all that with our sense of superiority and we are not even aware of how we treat others based on our bias.

Sometimes, we resort to believing and spreading lies about people we deem different from us. Sometimes, anger and hatred take over our human decency and we make decisions that have serious impact on others.¹

Unfortunately, we absorb the social bias of our surroundings. We breathe it in as we breathe in the pollution in the air. We grow up with it and don't even notice it, unless we are part of the people that get abused. It's hard to notice our social bias, unless, by grace, our eyes are opened, and we make an intentional choice to change.

When grace intervenes on the sinner's behalf, it's the division, it's the rankings that are shattered. Differences are not abolished; God loves diversity! It's the end of bias, hierarchy, chauvinism – an end to physical, psychological, and spiritual segregation.

When our eyes are opened by the grace of God, we realize how small we have lived, how unkind we have been, and we are glad Jesus has intervened and exorcised the demons that kept us bound and drowned them into the sea.

Into the waters of Baptism, we leave behind all that has encumbered us and have power over us, all divisions, all prejudices and thoughts of superiority, all anger, all hatred. We are born anew. We are born children of the same God, siblings to one another.

Let us pray for a desire to understand and come closer to one another. Let us pray for a spirit of openness to hear and learn from others. let us pray for a spirit of conversion and justice.

May the Good Lord have mercy on us and help us to grow in faith. Amen.

¹ [Right-wing extremists amp up anti-LGBTQ rhetoric online | AP News](#)