

Sermon / 19 June 2022 / Luke 8:26-39 / Say Your Name, Say Your Name
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What is your name?

Jesus wants to know. I want to know. We, this community, want to know.

What's your name?

Who are you? What frightens you? What holds you back? What keeps you from being all you want to be? What stops you from believing you are a beloved child of God?

Who are you?

What's your name? We want to know.

Today's Gospel lesson is certainly one wild ride. No matter if you've heard this story many times or today was your first encounter with it, you have to admit it is whack-a-doodle.

Stories in which Jesus heals someone are usually gentle. But today's story becomes violent. A person in chains. Demons scream at Jesus. Illness infects a herd of pigs. Pigs drown themselves in a lake. Townspeople are scared by what Jesus has done and tell him to leave.

Not just a simple healing story for us today, huh?

We could examine exactly *why* it's different this morning, but today - in a world that is hurting and confused - I'd like us to consider what this story offers to us right now. Let's consider how today's story of Jesus healing a person with a Legion of problems speaks to us.

What is your name? Who are you? What is keeping YOU in chains?

That is what Jesus asks the troubled person today. "What is your name?"

And that is where we need to begin. It is the most basic of questions. What is your name?

Who are you? How do you identify?

Perhaps Jesus asks this question of the trouble person to try and get them to recall to themselves who they really are. Tell me about YOU – not these demons that possess you – but tell me who you are deep in the core of your being. Remember your humanity and that you are beloved a child of God.

What's your name? Every week in Children's Chapel, we begin by introducing ourselves. "I'm Deacon David." And then everyone responds "Welcome, Deacon David. You are loved by God." We acknowledge each other by name and welcome each other into the love of God.

What is your name? Jesus asks us this question. We should ask each other this question. What is your name? Who are you? Who are you really? Beneath societies' labels and your medical diagnoses and beyond your fear and your shame and your pride, who are you when you are free from the prying eyes of the world? When you don't have to pretend to have it all together? Who are you before someone tells you to change?

Jesus begins where we must begin – with an honest naming and questioning of ourselves. Can we answer Jesus? Can we answer each other? What's your name?

When asked this question in today's Gospel, the troubled person responds that their name is "Legion." The text explains this is because many demons had entered them. This person's brokenness wasn't caused by one single problem, but by many problems. This person was so hurt they had lost their dignity, their sanity, and their community. They were lost and wandering in a place where no one else wanted to go. They had no home. This person was isolated and suffered self-destruction because of their myriad problems.

Does this sound familiar to anyone. I know it sounds more familiar to me than I want to admit. What ails us as human beings *is* legion. What messes us up is complicated and manifold. How nice it would be to pinpoint one single problem, get rid of it, and then be on our way.

But the evil which haunts us has many identities. Every one of us is vulnerable to outside forces which threaten to take over our lives, to keep us quiet, to take away our true names, and separate us from God and from each other.

We may suffer from anxiety or depression. Some of us are addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, wealth, power, being thin, being popular. Some of us are slaves to the internet or the 24-hour news cycle. We are prone to bitterness or dishonesty, or obsessed with being right. Some of us suffer from traumatic experiences in our past. Some people are imprisoned in systems of injustice that go back so far in history they cannot even imagine being free. Some of us encounter hatred from others because of our skin color, our accents, our gender, our sexualities, or how we choose to identify ourselves. We are ill.

God wants us to be alive. This "legion" would prefer for us to be dead. Today's person in need of healing isn't just a story from 2,200 years ago. It is our story today.

What is your name? It isn't legion! We cannot be defined by our problems and our troubles. We have a name and an identity as beloved Children of God. And neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else

is all creation can separate us from the love of God. Paul wrote that to the new church in Rome when they were having troubles and, perhaps, did not yet even HAVE a name.

Sure. Words are cheap. How does this work?

Today, when each of us is overwhelmed by a world full of liars trying to convince us they know what is best, and when rights of women and minorities are being stripped away, and when gun violence is an everyday occurrence, but those whom we trust to govern us don't protect us, and yet we don't have the time or energy to even think about all this because prices are so high, we struggle to make ends meet...

Where and how do we find respite from our legion? Where do we find someone who even cares what our name is?

Our Gospel story today tells where to go to find healing – at the feet of Jesus. The friend in need of healing falls at Jesus' feet at the beginning of their encounter. And after their demons are dispelled, the townspeople find them at Jesus feet again. God. Jesus. The church. Here! This is where we can find the help we need. This is where salvation is found.

The healed person wants to physically follow Jesus. But Jesus tells this whole and healed person - Jesus tells us - go out and tell the world what God has done for you.

See what this St. Mark's community of love has done for me! You can have that too.

You are welcome here. Please come on in and join us. I'm David. What's your name?

Three weeks ago, I gave sermon on a Sunday after a mass shooting at an elementary school in Texas. Here I stand again giving a sermon after yet another mass shooting. All mass shootings are equally horrific. Other than the body count, they are all the same. But this one seems exceptionally personal to some of us because it was in a church...an Episcopal church.

At the same time as many of us from St. Mark's were celebrating LGBTQ+ Pride last weekend here in Albuquerque, 31 people packed in a U-Haul trailer to riot in a similar event in Idaho.

A parishioner reached out to the clergy and vented their frustration and fears about the continued violence in our country.

To illustrate my point about finding our names and our identities here in this place, and with Fr. Christopher's permission, I'm going to share his response to this parishioner's heartfelt concern.

“The violence makes no sense and is, as you say, devastating. I think that the only faithful response is to keep creating a loving community that lives out a different message than our culture is sending. St. Mark's is prophetic just by being who we are and welcoming

people to come and experience the depth of faith available. We love and appreciate you a great, great deal. And we share your pain about the world gone mad around us. The love of God has been poured into us for a reason and that reason is still in front of us.”

Here, at the feet of Jesus, our legion of problems do NOT define us. They exist, but they are not who we are.

Here, in this community of faith, where we are encouraging everyone into a summer of conversation with each other - where we are wanting to share our names - this is where we discover that we are ALL truly beloved children of God.

Let's get started.

So, what's your name?

I'm Deacon David.

Now all together, in unison:

What is your name?

Welcome everyone....all of you...you are loved by God.

Credit to Rev. Debie Thomas of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, CA, for the structure/outline of this sermon - from her posting of "Legion" on the blog "Journey with Jesus" 16 June, 2019.

Thanks to Destiny's Child and their 1999 song "Say My Name" for running through my head this past week.