

Pastor Troy E. Medlin
2nd Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
Grace Lutheran Church and School
6/19/2022

Named, Unbound, and Unafraid

It has been over ten years since I came out for the first time. I remember it just like it was yesterday. I felt so much relief and so much joy in that dimly lit dorm room. Like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I was on holy ground.

I also remember something else. It was my companion before and after that moment. It was a feeling that lived in the pit of my stomach. It was there consistently and would make itself known at all sorts of times and in all sorts of places. Just so I would not forget that it was there. It was just a part of my life. It was fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of vulnerability. Fear of not fitting in. Fear of losing faith and family, the two things I have always loved the most. Fear of being bullied. Fear of how other people would react.

This feeling of fear over time, became like a fitted jacket that I wore no matter the occasion. I became so accustomed to wearing it down through the years it was not just an accessory, but it became a part of my daily wardrobe.

And, this fear and its suffocating captivity kept me from living the life of freedom that is our birthright in the waters of baptism.

You could say that during some of those years that bookended my first coming out, fear was one of my names. I prayed that no one would mention anything related to LGBTQ folks otherwise I would feel as if an invisible spotlight was turned on me. Fear would come roaring up from my gut and sit on my heart.

Many times the unclean spirits had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven into the wilds. He walked and lived among the tombs without any clothes. His voice muzzled. Named only by the demons that possess him, this was his reality for a long time. Such a long time that, as the dean of the chapel at Duke would put it: his storm was his norm.

It was very clear to those in the country of the Gerasenes that this man was being tormented. His wounds that cried out for healing were viscerally seen by those around him. They gawked at him as if he was some kind of circus spectacle there for their twisted amusement. For us, they are not so easily noticed. Often they do not have physical manifestations, at least that are noticeable to you and me. That does not make them any less real.

What are the invisible shackles that you wear that keep you bound? The ones that fit too well. They are your constant clothing. They are just a part of our life. What are the names of the demons that haunt you?

As one episcopal priest says, “The truth is, what ails us as human beings *is* Legion. Just like the man in our text. The evil that haunts us has many faces, many names. We are all — every one of us — vulnerable to forces that seek to take us over, to bind our mouths, to take away our true names, and to separate us from God and from each other.”

For me, one of those demons was fear. Maybe it still visits from time to time and needs to be exercised. I imagine we could all share the names of the demons that seek to befriend us. They are innumerable. Both inside and all around us. Inside we are visited by the demons of perfectionism, shame, greed, selfishness, the demon that whispers we are unworthy. Outside, there is more.

The demon by the name of white supremacy continues to stalk us and keep us from the fullness of life that God intends for everyone. All these years after the first Juneteenth celebration in Texas too many people of color are still only free conceptually and not in practice. The demon of violence still possesses us as it encourages us to bow down to the altar of faux nationalism all the while putting more chains on us.

And the demon of homophobia is sulking around. A Washington Post headline Friday read, Pride events targeted in surge of anti-LGBTQ threats, violence. The article goes on to say “attacks have intensified this month during the first big Pride events since pandemic restrictions were lifted, most notably with the white nationalist Patriot Front’s foiled attempt to disrupt a celebration in northern Idaho.” Then there is the startling rise of dangerous rhetoric against our transgender and non-binary siblings that is pure evil.

Jesus looks and sees him in all his brokenness and agony, asks his name, and casts out all of those forces of evil. This was all while Jesus was on his way to calvary, where he put to death all those forces of evil in his own death and resurrection. This is who Jesus is and what he does. As Tertullian said, “Jesus is the exterminator of spiritual foes.”

In the waters of baptism we have been joined to that death and resurrection. We are clothed in him. We have a new name: child of God. We have been healed, forgiven, and given life beyond the tombs where we used to walk. Jesus sees you and you belong to him forever. Chains of sin broken under the weight of the empty tomb we find even our voice has been recovered.

Jesus sees you in your brokenness and agony and promises you that they will not have the last word. Found and at home in his arms we know all that threatens us will not have the final say for they have already been thwarted once and for all.

Demons cast out, we are now in the broad place of faith where a future is not only possible, it is promised. We join our deliverer in the spirited work of pushing back against the darkness putting up its last, flayleling, empty protests. Working against fear and for the dignity of all people, working for grace and mercy in a world of scapegoating. And working for a world that reflects the liberating good news of Jesus Christ who came to set the captives free. You and I included.

We put flesh on these words proclaimed by St. Paul, that some believe were part of an ancient baptismal liturgy. “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. *Down in the water*: there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; *back up out of the water*: 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.”

I can hear our new voices harmonizing with our brother from the gospel whose name is “beloved of God” singing about all that God has done for us.