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Deviled Ham, You Say?

Luke 8:26-39

In the 8th chapter of Luke we encounter Jesus as teacher, healer, and miracle worker. In these we see him as powerful, forceful, and fearful.

In the scripture passage for today Jesus has traveled for the first time in this Gospel into the territory of the Gentiles, that is non-Jews. He does this on his own initiative. There is no invitation extended to him to do this. Jews were to avoid contact with Gentiles, 'idolaters' – any who did not worship the God of Israel; though there were connections between Jewish and Gentile communities in politics, and trade and commerce.

Just before arriving in this Gentile territory, Jesus confronted the wind and waves generated by a storm on the Sea of Galilee as he and his disciples crossed it in a boat. Jesus commanded the wind and the waves to stop, which they did. He demonstrated control over them as if they were demonic powers. He rebuked them even as he had rebuked unclean spirits in chapter 4 of Luke. Jesus' authority is shown to extend over the world of natural forces, over the sea and the deep; over those things considered evil.

Upon getting out of the boat, Jesus was met by a man who had demons; today we would probably say he was crazy, mentally deranged. Chris Haslam writes that "demons were spirits of an evil kind, thought to do battle, as a 'legion' with God and God's allies." The man was naked and he lived amongst the tombs – the local cemetery. He was one who lived alone, cut off from the human community. He was one forced into existing among the dead, and not among the living.

We are introduced to this unrestrained, frightening and uncontrollable man whom we would not want to encounter on our own. We would not want to meet such a man – no clothes, long matted dirty hair, scarred & bruised, with eerie piercing & jerky eyes – even as a part of a haunted house at Halloween time.

Everything about the man screamed of 'unclean', keep away from him or he will contaminate you. He went right up to Jesus. Yet Jesus did not back off or turn away from the man. He was not afraid. Jesus acted without hesitation and ordered the unclean spirit to leave the man. The man fell down before Jesus and screamed out. He said, in part: '...Jesus, Son of the Most High God....' The demon-possessed man used the same words about Jesus that the angel Gabriel used in announcing the birth of Jesus to Mary: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High,..."

A demon-possessed man was able to recognize who Jesus was, unlike his disciples, who after Jesus had calmed the wind and the waves on the Sea of Galilee, had asked in Luke 8:25: 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?' As he commanded the winds and the water, so Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to leave the man.

It is at this point that we learn a bit more of the man's existence. To help them manage this situation, the people of the town had the man bound in chains and shackles, though he would often break free of these. They had decided the way to deal with him was to try to keep him under some control but at a distance, far enough away from the community that he would rarely interfere with their lives. They wanted their lives to be as normal and predictable as possible. This is also where we learn that the demon would drive him out into the wilds – thought to be the abode of the devil and demons, of evil and everything unclean.

It was a common belief in the time of Jesus that knowing its name gave one power over a spirit. The response from the man when Jesus asked his name was “Legion”; the text says, ‘for many demons had entered him.’ The name ‘Legion’ is an interesting word at which to look. In the dictionary I have in my office the following is the 1st meaning:

“In ancient Rome, a major military unit ...
altogether comprising between 4200 and 6000 men.”

Other interesting notes gleaned from several sources are this:

For the Jewish people, Legion “symbolizes the Roman ‘occupying forces whose power was overwhelming and whose presence meant the loss of control over every dimension of their own society.’”

Chris Haslam writes:

Roman might was symbolized by a very fertile sow that gave birth to 30 piglets and by the wild boar. The wild boar was the symbol of the Legio X Fretensis; this legion was stationed in Syria and fought in the Jewish revolt of 66-70 AD.

We are aware that though at times in the text “Legion” is sometimes referred to in the singular, so just one demon, other places in the text use the plural, indicating there are numerous demons. We understand that the man is being pulled in many directions; he has no focus, no center. He has no peace or unity; rather he is full of disunity and conflict. We would understand him to be overrun with destructive & wild forces. The man does not have his own identity. He does not have his own name.

We must remember that even before Jesus asked the demon its name, he had already ordered it out of the man. Jesus had power over the evil spirit without even knowing its name. This was recognized when the demons pled with Jesus not to torment them. These dangerously powerful demons knew that Jesus was even more powerful than they. He had this power as the Son of the Most High God.

And so “they (that is the demons) begged him (Jesus) not to order them to go back to the abyss.” What is it about this “abyss” that the demons did not want to go there? The abyss is defined as the lowest part of the underworld, as it comes from the Greek word meaning ‘bottomless.’ “It is the depth of the sea, under the earth, the world of gloom and darkness. It was often considered to be the realm or prison of rebellious spirits, the bottomless pit where demonic powers were to be confined by God for eternity.”

Obviously, the demons did not want to be confined, chained up, unable to engage in their deeds of evil. The demons were aware of the swine herd on a nearby hill; so they begged to be allowed to enter

the pigs. For Jews, eating pork amounted to paganism and deserting their faith. As unclean animals, according to the Jews, a swine herd would be an appropriate place for the demons to go. And swine were the most frequently used animal for sacrifices in Greek and Roman worship. So even pagan religion and Roman rule were under Jesus' authority.

The demons wanted to dwell in these other creatures and so go on living before their ultimate banishment into the abyss. They wanted to be beyond the reach of Jesus. The demons left the man, entered into the swine, and caused the herd to run down a steep bank into the lake and drown. It was because of these demons entering into this herd of pigs that one commentator wrote that this was the first account of 'deviled ham', much earlier than the Underwood Company's Deviled Ham that started to be sold in this country between 1868-1870.

Deviled Ham – what is it and why is it so named? From the internet I learned the following:

Deviled – a culinary term which first appeared in the 18th C ... meaning to cook something with fiery hot spices or condiments....The term was presumably adopted because of the connection between the devil and the excessive heat in Hell.

And,

Deviled...any variety of dishes prepared with hot seasonings, such as cayenne or mustard. The word derives from the association with the demon who dwells in hell....Today the word 'deviled' is applied to a multitude of spicy dishes.

Deviled Ham:

besides the required ham, might include some of the following:

¼ of a small habanero chili	
Worcestershire sauce	mayonnaise
jalapeno chili	Dijon mustard
sweet paprika	hot sauce and salt
green onions	
sour cream	
Creole mustard	
celery	
tarragon	
cayenne pepper or, black pepper	

And so the swine herd, this now deviled ham, did not turn out to be a place of safety for the demons. As the swine were destroyed as they drowned in the Sea, so we must assume that the demons died as well, now confined to a watery grave, to their abyss, for all eternity. There was no place they could go that these demons would be beyond the reach of the power of Jesus.

As you would expect, the swineherds rush off to tell the townspeople of the catastrophe that had just occurred. If, as the Gospel of Mark reports in the telling of this encounter with Jesus, the swine herd numbered 2000, this would be a major economic loss for the owner/owners of the herd.

So the citizens came out to the lake to check it out for themselves. But there is no more mention of the swine. The story focuses only on the healed man from this point on. Again, Chris Haslam puts it this way:

Look at the changes in this man's life:
from outside the city to inside it,
from living in tombs, to living in a house,
from nakedness to being clothed,
from being demented to being of sound mind, from being enslaved to being set free,
and from being driven into the wilds to sitting at the feet of Jesus.

Seeing the man healed and restored was understood by the townspeople to mean that there would be change for them. This man could now be part of their community, not one set and kept apart from it. They would have to interact with him on the streets of the town, in their businesses, and maybe even in their homes.

After what he had been and all the stories about his exploits that had passed among them, all this made them most uncomfortable. And then seeing this man with Jesus, this one who was said to have healed this uncontrollable demon-possessed man – they were afraid. Not only had Jesus healed the man and so upset the status-quo life in their town, Jesus had also cost the community, hit them in their pocketbooks as the swine herd had been destroyed. This was way too much for them all. After all, what was a once possessed and wild man now restored to his true humanity in comparison to their economic loss of the swine?

In face of what Jesus would cost them, they could not rejoice at one being restored to their community. And so before Jesus could change anything or anyone else or cost them any more money, they asked Jesus to leave – Stay away from us, leave us alone, we want our old life back. They did not want to have to deal with what God would do next in their community. Jesus honored their request.

But as he was leaving, Jesus did not grant the request of the healed man. Jesus would not let him come with them. No, he was to stay as a newly commissioned disciple and tell the people of his community and the surrounding areas all that God had done for him. He became one who, because of what had happened to him, could but share the good news.

Though there may have been, or are now, situations in our lives that we wish Jesus would work wonders and act with the power he displayed as he calmed a windstorm, rebuked demons, healed, and restored to life – something dramatic, obvious, and not able to be misinterpreted – would we truly really want that? The story reminds us that there is no place beyond Jesus' power to set free.

His power is superior to any demon's power anywhere in the world. Are we prepared to be knocked out of our routines, have our lives turned upside down, set out again on our life journeys without our accustomed reference points?

This story leaves us with having to make a decision about the direction for our lives. Out of fear would we be like the townspeople and tell Jesus to leave us alone for we don't want our lives disturbed and disrupted by him? Would we be willing to leave behind our comfortable familiarity, to change self-destructive behavior? Would we stop clinging for dear life to old ways that keep us marginal – as individuals, family members, a church?

Or like the healed man, would we be so grateful for what Jesus had done that we couldn't help wanting to live even more faithfully as a disciple, believing in God, the source of all power and grace? Strengthened by Christ, would we face the future or even danger with great courage? Would we celebrate God's power in our midst?

As you think about how you would respond to these questions, hear Frederick Henry Hedge's translation of Martin Luther's words:

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.