

### ***Do Not Disturb***

In the name of him through whom we have become children of the heavenly Father, dear friends in Christ: I suspect that by now almost everyone has heard most of those dumb light bulb jokes that describe the way various church denominations deal with issues; you know, like: How many charismatics does it take to change a light bulb? Only one since their hands are always in the air anyway. Or how many Pentecostals does it take to change a light bulb? Ten: one to change the bulb and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness. Or how many Episcopalians? Three: one to actually change the bulb, and two to say how much better they liked the old one. For Catholics the answer is none because traditionally they use candles. For Mormons the answer is five: one man to do it and four wives to tell him how. For the Amish the answer is a question: What's a light bulb? For Jehovah's Witnesses the answer is uncertain because the lights seem to be on, but there's nobody home. One of my personal favorites is the answer for the United Methodists, which is, "We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a new light bulb; however, if in your own journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, that's fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship to your light bulb and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-lived, and tinted; all of which are equally valid paths to illumination".

Okay, there are many more – and I won't keep torturing you with them; but the reason that some of them draw a chuckle is because they touch a bit on the truth. And the truth revealed about Lutherans in these silly jokes is this: How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? None, because Lutherans don't believe in change. I'd say that hits us about spot on. You're going to encounter *some* resistance to change with just about everyone – it's natural; but we Lutherans have elevated it to an art form. It's virtually an article of faith, almost like an eleventh commandment: Thou shalt not change! And it needs to be said that in some ways this is an admirable quality, something to be desired. The doctrines of our church, for example, are nonnegotiable; just as are the special emphases we place on the critical components of our faith such as Jesus Christ crucified for sinners, justification by grace alone through faith alone, the infallibility of God's Word, the understanding that all of God's Word is speaking of Christ, and the truth that the Lord Jesus is truly present with his Church in the Word and the Sacraments, to name but a few. We shouldn't change these things, and so we're right to dig in our heels and refuse to budge.

Unfortunately, sometimes we carry over this virtue of inflexibility to areas where it isn't quite so desirable. Some of you may know that in the early part of the last century there was a huge flap in a lot of our LCMS churches about conducting worship services in English. By then the Synod had been operating in this country for somewhere on the order of sixty years. Still, many of our forbearers apparently thought that it would border on sacrilege to address the Lord in any language other than German. But we needn't go back a hundred years for examples of Lutheran resistance to change. Every thirty or forty years the Synod produces a new hymnal – ostensibly with the goal of uniting us. Instead, it usually causes congregational civil wars to break out—which are anything but civil as one group wants to hang onto the old hymnal, another wants the new one, and still others want to go back to one of the hymnals they had before the one they're using now. No, Lutherans really don't like to change very much. And there's one area in particular that they don't like to make any changes. I don't know that it's unique to Lutherans – in fact, it's a universal problem with all sinners – but we especially hate making changes in the way we live our lives.

And that brings me to today's Gospel lesson in which we find Jesus and his disciples making a short visit to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. And to put the story in context, you should know that it happens sometime between the midpoint and the end of the Galilean phase of his ministry. By this time Jesus was pretty well known in the cities and villages throughout the north. He had a large following that was growing and gaining momentum. Things were going great. So then, one day, almost out of the blue, he says to his disciples, "Let's cross to the other side of the lake." Now, that doesn't seem very strange to us perhaps; but it sure would have to the disciples. You see, while they were on the western side they were in what was once Israel, the Promised Land. Here Jewish culture and tradition were still dominant or were at least major

factors in shaping society. And of course, the people following Jesus were all Jews. But it wouldn't be that way on the eastern shore of the lake. There in the lands of the Gerasenes the people were mostly descendants of Israel's idol-worshipping Syrian enemies. And now in these days a form of pagan Greek culture was dominant there. So from a Jewish perspective it was a defiled land populated by filthy Gentile dogs who conducted their unholy worship of idols while practicing any number of other unclean traditions and ways of life. In short, it was a place that any self-respecting Jew would want to avoid. And now Jesus says, "C'mon fellas, let's go check it out." I can't imagine that they were too thrilled with the prospect.

To make matters worse, while they were sailing across a furious squall fell on them. The disciples feared for their lives as their boat became swamped and started to break apart and sink. They must have thought, "We knew this was a bad idea." Anyway, to cut to the chase, this was the episode in which they had to wake Jesus who was peacefully sleeping through what they believed to be their imminent doom. He casually yawned, stretched, and told the storm to knock it off. It obeyed his voice at once – which impressed the disciples very much; still, they couldn't have been too happy about making this trip in the first place.

Well, then, as if to confirm their worse concerns about this undesirable journey, as soon as they land the boat on the far shore they're confronted by a violent madman. You've got to picture this guy running down the beach at them, howling like a wounded animal and flailing his arms in a threatening way. He's completely naked and encrusted all over with filth and sores. He's got long matted hair, and bits of bloody raw meat and spittle foam in his greasy, tangled beard. His claw-like fingernails are black with dirt, and his wild, yellow eyes are opened unnaturally wide as they rapidly dart about without seeming to focus on anything. As he draws near, the disciples get a whiff of his noxious breath and unwashed body, which are alone enough to knock them down. Oh yeah: he's just the sort of welcoming committee they were expecting to find in this awful place.

Which I think is exactly the point: this guy is the embodiment of everything that's wrong with this whole region. Everything about him is defiled and unholy. He's rotten even by the standards of a place where the standards are unacceptably low. And we're given a few details that tell us just how bad it is for him. Many times his pagan countrymen have tried to control him by binding him with iron chains and strong cords. And for good reason: he's a threat to public safety – no telling what harm he might do. And no doubt he steals livestock and robs peoples' gardens and orchards to survive. He's a menace to the community. So, they've tried to tie him up; but it's no good. No matter what they try they can't hold him with external force because he is captive within to a whole army of demonic spirits. They seem to give him superhuman strength with which he throws off both those who would try to bind him and the shackles that they attempt to place upon him. Driven by these spirits from the fellowship of the living, he finds shelter in the cave-like crypts of the dead. Mark's Gospel adds that he spent his days gouging himself with sharp stones and crying out among the tombs. So this is his life: filthy, alone, surrounded by death and decay, and engaged in any number of self-destructive behaviors. He's far beyond the help of any of his countrymen – as utterly lost and hopeless as a person could be.

That is, until Jesus came into his life. And then things began to change – change radically and for the better. The madman's violent charge toward the disciples is halted as Jesus calmly holds up his hand. And now, with the same ease that he stopped the storm on the lake he starts to still the tempest raging in this man's tortured soul. Jesus commands the unclean spirits to release him and come out. What follows is a fascinating conversation. The demons wheedle and whine as they beg Jesus to leave them alone. They're quite comfortable where they are and they don't want to be disturbed. And perhaps I should take a moment here to clear up a common misconception. Popular images of Satan and the demons portray them as the masters of the underworld. It's like hell is Satan's private kingdom and the demons work for him by tormenting the souls of the people who end up there. That's not at all the way the Bible describes it. Instead, according to the Scripture, the domain of Satan and the demons is *this* world – at least for the time being. And they're busy here working as much mischief and deception as they can; for they know their days are numbered. They know full well that at the appointed time, on the fast-approaching day of the Lord's glorious return, they will be overthrown and *then* cast down into hell where they suffer eternally – not as the masters of that frightful place; but rather as its most despised inmates. They know that day is coming, and they fear it – and that's exactly the basis of the appeal of these demons now in our story. "It's not fair, Jesus. You're too early. Don't send us into the deep pit just yet – or at least, we implore you, let us depart into that herd of swine over there."

A fitting place indeed: unclean animals as a temporary home for unclean spirits. My apologies to Iowa pork farmers; but that's the way the disciples would have seen it. They were Jews, remember. To them the mere presence of the hogs would have been an offense. And here they had landed not far from where a large herd was grazing on a bluff overlooking the lake. Again St. Mark provides us a little more detail telling us that there were about two thousand pigs in the herd – and again I want to stress that it's part of the overall picture here informing us just how polluted and defiled this land they're visiting is. And surely too it's part of the spiritual message we are to take away from this story that Jesus allows the demons to change their address from a man to a herd of swine. The point is that he's here to free *people* from Satan's power and the ravages of their own sin; he isn't particularly concerned about livestock – especially what's considered unclean livestock. More on that a bit later. The interesting thing here is that even the hogs can't tolerate the presence of demons. They too are driven into self-destructive insanity. Squealing in terror they stampede over the cliff like lemmings into the sea and they drown – all of which foreshadows the eventual final overthrow of Satan, his demons, and all those who are under their influence.

But now here's the part of the story that pertains to us. The swineherds – some of whom were probably nearly trampled while trying to turn the headlong rush of the hogs to the cliff – are naturally shocked and upset at what they've just witnessed. It was scary. And now there's a whole lot of ruined bacon, pork chops, and tenderloins bobbing in the hot sun down there on the surface of the lake. They don't know exactly what happened; but they do know it had something to do with their resident madman and that boatload of strangers down there on the beach. So, they run back to town to deliver the bad ag-report and get some reinforcements. Soon a large crowd has gathered around Jesus, and they are astonished at what they see. Here's their notorious wild man who's been terrorizing their community for so long sitting peacefully at the feet of Jesus while he teaches. He's been bathed and clothed, he's asking articulate questions, and from time to time there are tears of gratitude welling up in the corners of his eyes as he listens to Jesus explain to him the mysteries of God's kingdom.

The people see all this. They realize that they are in the presence of someone who has incredible power to change what's broken and dysfunctional in the hearts and minds of men. I mean, if he could so vastly improve the life of this guy who was so thoroughly messed up, imagine what he could do for the rest of us. They take all this in—and it scares them. They don't want to be changed. Like the demons themselves, these people don't want to be disturbed. They are happy with their pagan lifestyles. They like their pet sins. They have appetites for unclean things – which is here represented by the pork; but I hope you see that it's a whole lot more than that. In the healed former madman, they are given a glimpse of what their lives could be, the peace and freedom they might have themselves, and they say, “No. We don't want it. We don't want to be changed.” And so they beg Jesus to leave them – which, to their present disadvantage and eternal ruin, he does.

In today's Old Testament lesson, we hear the Lord calling out, “Here I am ... I spread out my hands all day to a rebellious people who are walking in ways that are not good.” And that's exactly what he's doing in our story today. He's saying, “Here I am. I'm here to help you. I'm here to set you free from those habitual sins that oppress you, that put you into conflict with the people you love, that prevent you from being the kind of person that God wants you to be. Just look and this man and you'll see what I can do for you.” And they turn him down cold. They hang out the “Do not disturb” sign to Jesus in the land of the Gerasenes. They are comfortable with the status quo.

The question I'd ask you to grapple with this morning is this: What and where are the lands of the Gerasenes in your life? In what areas have you said to Jesus, “Do not disturb”. No, I'm not suggesting that anyone here is possessed by demons; but each one of you does have an unclean spirit dwelling within: it's your own sinful nature. And I'm willing to bet that each one of you has marked off a certain amount of territory for it. It's a place where the disciple of Jesus in you doesn't want to visit; but that's okay with you. You've made a certain treaty with it. As long as it stays over on its side and keeps away from the territory you've marked off as your “spiritual side”, well, then it can do what it wants. It can go on satisfying whatever unholy appetites it desires. Now, I can't tell you what and where those places are in your life; but I am certain that you know, and I am certain that Jesus knows too. And the main point of this morning's lesson is that Jesus wants to visit

them. He wants to go there with you and make changes – radical changes for the better. And it's precisely here that our unchanging Lutheran doctrine works to our advantage, because we believe that Jesus is here, that he is truly present with us in his Word and Sacraments, and that through them he deals with us personally and with power to overcome, cast out, and destroy the unclean sinful spirit within us. He is here with the full force of his death for sin and his glorious resurrection to set us free, to forgive us our sins, and to restore us to a right mind and a holy way of life. Take down the "do not disturb" sign wherever it is that you've got it posted and welcome him. He will change you. He will change you in ways that you cannot possibly change yourself. And then, like the man in our story, you too will be able to go about declaring what great things Jesus has done for you. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***