

The Problem with Virtues

Year C – Season after Pentecost, 19 June 2022

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42-43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is the longest exorcism story in the Bible. It's a rich story full of revelation and potency for our faith journey. It's a story about demon possession, but it's also about politics, economics, community living, and more. That there are pigs in this country tips us off that we're in Gentile territory. That the demon's name is Legion reminds us of the Roman military whose violence will eventually take the lives of Jesus and many of his friends. That the demoniac is living in isolation and chains outside the city tells us something about how this community treats afflicted people. That the townspeople asked Jesus to leave suggests they valued their way of life more than the healing power of God.

Of all these dynamics it's this final one that captures my attention. When reading the Bible, we commonly try to "find ourselves" in the text. But today I'd like to suggest we try something different. I'd like for us to play "would you rather" with the story.

From time to time, my family plays the game *Would you rather?*

Would you rather? is a game of questions, and your answers to these questions reveals something of what you value or fear. It goes something like this: would you rather walk on a bed of nails or eat a live cricket? Would you rather be blind or deaf? The options are endless, really. So today, I'd like to ask, would you rather be the demon-possessed man, or a concerned townspeople?

I've titled my sermon today "The problem with virtues." If you know me, you're probably puzzled by this because you know that I see theology and ethics to go hand in hand. By this I mean that I see virtues – those habits by which we come to be good people – as essential for following Jesus. That's why I often refer to our saying the Apostles Creed, or our communal prayer, or our confession of sin as our habits. I think habits like these train us for following Jesus.

The ancient philosophers identified four virtues they thought were the most fundamental: wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control. Christians would later affirm these virtues and add faith, hope, and love, which are often called theological virtues. But in our lessons today we see that the problem with the four ancient virtues is that they don't give us the habits we need to follow Jesus. Here lies one of the biggest confusions today around the question of what it means to live a good life.

The townspeople in the surrounding country were likely people of virtue who thought they were living good lives. Community wisdom perceived that the violence of the demoniac required his imprisonment. The demoniac's lack of self-control was hardly a model for the community's young, so his banishment to the tombs showed the consequences of intemperate behavior. Courage was on display and rashness and cowardice avoided by those who guarded the demoniac by chaining and shackling him. And the demoniac's treatment seemed just to the townspeople, given that they were limiting the threat he posed to their fellow townsfolk. It's likely then, that the common, everyday townspeople of the country of the Gerasenes was a person of character and moral resolve, and they were quite happy with the life they were living.

Being townspeople comes naturally to all of us. From an early age, we've been trained to be townspeople for our country. We pledge our allegiance to the country's flag. We rise and remove our caps for our country's praise song. And we defend our rights with passion and conviction. But our lessons today suggest that the values and virtues of the everyday townspeople is not enough to follow Jesus.

How the demoniac responded to Jesus and how the townspeople responded to Jesus should give us everything we need to answer the question of who we would rather be. The demoniac responded to his healing by becoming a disciple, sitting at Jesus's feet, asking to follow Jesus. The townspeople responded in fear and asked Jesus to leave them. Twice, in fact, Luke tells us that the townspeople were afraid. The demoniac emerged as a disciple, while the townspeople were exposed as anti-Christ.

Fear also looms large in our reading from 1 Kings. Commentators are at odds about why Elijah, the prophet who had just crushed hundreds of pagan prophets in a spectacular show of God's power, was all of a sudden running for the hills after a threat from Jezebel the queen. This fear compelled him to flee into the wilderness and drove him to despair of his life. But it was God's care for him that gave him the strength he needed to remain steadfast to God's call on his life.

Without question, Elijah's experience on Mount Horeb (aka Mount Sinai) is meant to recall Moses's experience on that same mountain. These experiences show us that being God's prophet is too heavy a burden when we forget it's about God, not us. Elijah will soon learn, as Moses before him, that God's work is not for isolated individuals, but collaborators with God and others. But the other bit worth emphasizing is that God is to be found in the quiet, the still, and the small.

One of the most haunting lines in all of Luke's Gospel is the line in chapter 19 where Jesus weeps over the people of Jerusalem who "did not recognize the time of [its] visitation from God" (19:44). But the demoniac did. And so did Elijah. Our reading from 1 Kings shows us that Elijah recognized God in the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:12). I like the more literal translation of the Hebrew, proposed by biblical scholar Beverly Gaventa, that Elijah recognizes God in "a thin whisper."¹ God is often not found in the loud and spectacular, but rather the quiet and often overlooked. If the townspeople didn't recognize God in Jesus, I doubt they would have recognized God in the thin whisper. But if it wasn't a matter of them failing to recognize their visitation from God, it's even more troubling: they recognized God and didn't want God.

"Be slow to pray," Eugene Peterson warns in his book *Working the Angles*. He says this because praying puts us on God's conditions rather than our own. And God's terms are sure to mess up our status quo way of life. Maybe this is the reason the townspeople asked Jesus to leave them. They saw his power to heal. They saw his desire to liberate the demoniac from his shackles and chains, his isolation and loneliness, his nakedness and confusion. And they didn't want it. Perhaps they saw how Jesus's liberating work cared little for their financial success. Or maybe they perceived that Jesus's liberating work wouldn't respect the occupying Romans, whom they had learned to live with. Jesus's healing action appeared to them as reckless, too radical and thoroughgoing to allow for a comfortable relationship with the world. Perhaps they saw that

¹ Beverly Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV*, Year C, 393.

following Jesus would demand more change than they were prepared to undergo, more sacrifice than they wanted to give. Perhaps the cost of discipleship was more than the townspeople were willing to pay.

I've been reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* and it's been as nourishing for me as it's been challenging. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who, when the second world war broke out, returned to Germany to be with his community, and ended up being killed by the Nazis.

As a pastor who saw theology and ethics as one and the same, Bonhoeffer also saw the limitations of the four common virtues for following Jesus. In his essay, "After Ten Years," he explores six different types of people, only one of which proves capable of following Jesus to the end. He writes,

"Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedience and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God – the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God" (4).

Through his experience in a Nazi prison camp, Bonhoeffer learned that only faith had the power to sustain a person in radical obedience to God.

This is the problem with virtue, with being committed to simply being moral or good people: it doesn't give us the habits and training we need to follow Jesus.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul helps us see that that the heart of Jesus following is about becoming little children. Through baptism we receive a new identity as God's children. This new identity equips us to live in the world as people exclusively committed to God. As children of God we come to see the world rightly and so develop the habits we need to live as God's children. Being a child of God requires habits like obedience, trust, and love. In Christ, our superficial identities like our nationality, social status, gender, and sexuality lose the power to define us. In Christ we become a new creation as we join a new family with God as our parent. Children of God are solely concerned with delighting God.

As God's children we receive the clarity and calling that gives us the strength and courage to face the Jezebels in our lives who plot our destruction. As God's children, we recognize God, receive God's healing, and embrace the new family God is fashioning for us. The real power for living well comes in affirming our fundamental identity as children of God. May God continue to give us the strength we need to live as God's children in a world that fails to recognize God and refuses to follow Jesus. And may God give us the courage to resist the comfort of the status quo as we embrace God's holy disruption of our lives in following Jesus.