

June 22, 2025

Luke 9:51-62

In today's gospel reading we have a captivating multi layered story of an individual, the man possessed by Legion (many) demons. But we know we never exist alone, No person is an island, separate unto themselves, so our story draws in the social and communal; the political and the cosmic. It is a challenging story to interpret in the modern setting but lets have a go!

A nameless man has been exiled to the margins of human existence. He's filthy naked in public. He can't control his speech. He's so violent that people can't come near him. All attempts to restrain him have failed. He exhibits the most common form of self-harm even today — self-mutilation. The popular thought of the day added it all up and called it demon possession.

I find it devastating that he has no name, no identity left, except for what he is captive to... He has been completely defined by what assails him, by what robs him of joy and health, by what hinders him and keeps him bound.

And so his community did what we still do today. They banished the man to the solitary margins of society. Maybe they were just at their wits end and did not know what else to do.

They forcibly restrained him - involuntary containment they call it today - and I have seen it happen in psych wards.

Many of you will know I worked for three and a half years in the psychiatric wards at Sunshine hospital. 4 wards, an older persons, a psycho geriatric ward, one called "rehabilitation" for those people, mostly younger ones, who had already had multiple admissions and either were not compliant with medication, or resistant or for whatever reason it was considered important to have an admission that had no pressure on getting a quick discharge but they could stay as long as required to get a person stabilised. Trouble is some people got stuck there, no improvement, nowhere else to go. A few had lived in a hospital

ward for 10plus years. The 4th ward was perhaps the most challenging - the acute ward, where people admitted often from emergency and psychotic, or suicidal or

Now already I have gone into difficult territory. We are reading a story of a man possessed by multiple demons and I have opened my sermon with comments about psych wards. There were people in those wards that thought they were demon possessed, and there are some Christians that believe that; but not me. The last thing I want to give is the impression that people struggling with, many courageously living with mental health issues are somehow possessed by evil spirits.

I guess you could say that people with mental illness (like the guy in today's story) are dealing with a situation they have not chosen, powerful forces that control their life to a degree... but beyond that....

I will use the language of the story and refer to evil spirits, or demons but I take this as metaphorical language in the sense that we can understand it if I say we all have our demons that try to control us or deny us our full freedom of humanity.

An email I received from a person who is a regular at the Sunshine site where I had my last placement and we ran a Men's Shed and who I have had a fair bit to do with over the years. He talk about the distress from experiencing and witnessing people being physically constrained.

Hi there,

last week I was in Devonshire Road at the harvester centre. It was there I witnessed 3 police cars and two ambulances... they were taking away a mentally ill client to hospital.

Now I get a bit triggered by this, as I have seen too many of my friends carted away. Some suffer badly. :(

I asked the staff and police about what was happening... what the person had done... where he was going... and the general reaction was: "Nothing to see here. Move along. Rack off..."

This only got me more angry, and so I asked again, and got similar response. Now I was not going to punch them out, I am not that silly. AND I do realise that some times there is a valid need for taking people to hospital. My main issue is that the process needs to be more visible and understood; rather than in secret like a police state.

It took me about 3 days to calm down, which is an improvement.

Many people are bound if not always physically, then emotionally, spiritually. Some are bound and don't even know it. Anxiety, fear, unforgiveness, anger, bitterness, disappointment, distraction, memories of the past—all these things can affect a person's perceptions, experiences, and quality of life.

It is not just the person themselves but also those who live with them, care for them, stand by helpless as a person destroys themselves or is destroyed.

I am not frightened of hell after I die, I don't think I will get sent there. The reason is that I have been in hell here in this life so I don't think God will send me there again. He wouldn't do that to me. My life is not really a life; it is just surviving. I live with so much anxiety and stress. It is just so unpredictable that I never know what is coming up. Josephine has been like this for so long and I have lived with it. Everytime the phone rings I panic. I think it is going to be bad news. Even when I am at a friend's place and the phone rings I think they must have found out where I was and are ringing to tell me she has done something. She has tried so many times – I told you about the time she tried to jump off the West Gate Bridge... and hurts herself all the time. She has tried to end it or hurt herself so many times, for years now. And I can't do anything about it. I am so helpless to change anything. I would wish it was me, I say that to God, take my life... take years off my life. I would swap one year without this anxiety for 20 years with it. I would sacrifice myself because a parent should not have to live like this, all the time worried about their children. It is always there every single day for year after year. I just live with it. What can you do?

Jesus as first step in healing asks his name - in ancient world to know the name is to have some power over. Again in modern psychology you have to name your problem/addiction/disease to begin the healing. "My name is Legion!" this homeless man screamed, "for we are many." Tortured in body, mind, and spirit, he embodied the gamut of human suffering, for a Roman "legion" consisted of 5,000 soldiers.

We are 5,000 Roman soldiers attacking this man from the inside out!" There is no way this man's mother named him LEGION! It would be as if we stood before a baptismal font with a precious baby and called him, DEPRESSION or ADDICTION or ANOREXIA. LEGION cannot be this man's name. God knows us and loves us for who God created us to be. but the spirits that have gripped him and cut him off from his community are demonic. It is an irony that while he himself is now isolated from everybody, he has been colonised by a whole company of demons.

The herdsmen and town people come back to the scene and find the man and Jesus chatting. after healing man clothed and in right mind. He had been healed.

What does Luke mean by "had been healed" (v. [36](#)) or *saved*? Same word. Look at the changes in the man's life:

**from outside the city to inside it;
from living in tombs and being driven into the desert to living in a house;
from nakedness to being clothed; and
from being demented to being of sound mind.**

From destructive isolation, he has become part of a nurturing, human community. He proclaims the good news.

The earliest proclamations of the gospel were overwhelmingly in terms of freedom, liberation. So much of Paul's preaching, so much of the gospel stories use the image of liberation. Liberation from the powerful forces that collude to stifle and mar the image of God that each of us wears. This powers include sin, evil, law, death, disease, unclean spirits.

What, according to this story, does freedom look like?

First of all, true freedom requires surrender to Jesus. When the man sees Jesus, he falls down before him. Often we don't know, or don't acknowledge, that we are bound. We may be able to identify other people's demons or places of bondage; we may even be able to call out systemic or societal ills and spirits. But we are prevented—by arrogance, by fear of shame, or by the masks we wear—from coming to Jesus and surrendering our whole hearts and selves to deliverance from

the things that keep us bound. When the man falls down before Jesus, it is an acknowledgment of the power of God in him. This is a key to full freedom.

Second, freedom means being restored specifically to community. So, when Jesus expels the demons, what does he tell the man to do? “Go back to your home in the town, and tell everyone how much God has done for you.” The encounter with Jesus does not just bring about an inner cleansing and a deeper personal relationship with God. It reunites him with his community and gives him a share in the ministry of the gospel among them.

When the man was bound by demons, he existed in isolation.

the late president Nelson Mandela: “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” After he encounters Jesus, he is commissioned for service among his people: “Jesus sent him away saying, ‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”