

### *Asking a Name*

Lessons: Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

Events like this in the New Testament give us all kinds of trouble. We may see movies about demon possession and terror, and we may pretend about hobgoblins on Halloween. But in the modern world – unless we just have vestiges of the primitive one in us – we don't think so much about demons taking over human wills and forcing them to do things.

...except of course, when it comes to modern demons and our confessions: "...the evil we have done and the good we have left undone." Surely as good as we are at heart, it must be some demonic force that causes us to do those bad things. We don't blame demons, but we are pretty quick to make excuses or blame something besides ourselves – rationalizing mistakes, blaming circumstance, or whatever. Sin is not a serious issue for us anyway since Jesus died to forgive us, and we get the forgiveness every time we come to church and read the Prayer of Confession.

But we tend to be more forgiving our own sins than we are of the sins of others that plainly are the result of just their bad decisions, wrong priorities, or just evil. It's almost like they are possessed by evil. If we believed in demons, we would excuse their behavior, too. But there are no demons, so the evil they do is their fault.

This man who lived in the graveyard was possessed by a whole crowd of demons, and it was still his fault. Back in Jesus' time, demon possession was a sign of punishment for evil deeds. There was no reason for the good people of the Garasenes to have compassion on the guy or try to help him. The best thing was to isolate him so they would not be hurt by his demons. He was no different from a leper or a blind man or someone with any other defect. They were all infectious. They were subject to powers, and they were powerless. Whatever they had done, there was no doing anything with them now. The only thing to do was keep them away.

Here comes Jesus across the sea of Galilee. He steps off the boat, and the demon-possessed guy is there to greet him. He is afraid of Jesus. He sees Jesus as a threat. He wants Jesus to leave him alone. Jesus is a tormenter! This guy is tormented, chained to the graves like an animal and wild as one, and he sees Jesus as a greater threat than the people and demons who put him in chains.

Now just stop and think how the guy's cry would be a shock to Jesus' expectations. By now, everyone is trying to get near Jesus, wanting something from him – just begging for a word of blessing or a cure for their ills. The guy must really be possessed. If he were just crazy, he would be begging for healing, too. Maybe it isn't the guy, but the demons. It must be the demons who know Jesus has more power than they have.

Look what Jesus does! ...the one thing no one else would do. Instead of seeing the demons, he sees the guy. Instead of recognizing great power of the possessors, Jesus sees a helpless man. And Jesus asks him, "What is your name?"

A name is a powerful thing – a full-of-power word. We spend a lot of time deciding on a name, and it is usually full of history or symbol or connection to family or friends. My daughter

Jenna and her husband David have decided on the names for their twin girls. But she won't tell Renee or me, or even our son John with whom she has shared conspiracies against us. Everybody has a name – even my not-yet-born granddaughters! It is driving me crazy that I don't know their names, ...and I am beginning to think my daughter's meanness might be a sign of demon possession. Not really.

Why are names so important? They connect us to people as people; they are like cords to tie us in personal relationship. We are not just someone; we are Evelyn or Lon, Dorothy or Joseph – my parents and in-laws.

Sometimes names can have a different power. Most of you don't remember the 70's when CB radios were all the rage. I was a Texan in North Carolina, and people knew me as "the Lone Ranger"; my faithful dog companion was called "Tonto." Radio operators for generations have had "call names" – nicknames that hide their real names. Their call names are "handles." That is the clue to another power in a name. It is not good for some people to know our real name. They can handle us, they have power over us. We hide our names from people when we don't want connection, when we want to say distant. We get uncomfortable when some stranger on the phone says, "Hello, David, how are you today?" "Who said you could invade my space? What do you want?" We know people can misuse our names, and we use a nickname or a label – a "call name" to keep some distance from our real name.

Jesus wants to connect to this poor, possessed guy, so he asks him his name. Jesus does not want to use or abuse him. He wants a relationship. The guy does not hide and run; he says "My name is Legion." It was not really his name. No one names a child "Legion." It was a label others had given him. It was a "call name," and it was name calling. It was a "handle." It was a name they could use to keep him at a distance. He was full of demons – a whole legion! They had named him Legion, called him Legion for so long that he could not remember his real name.

"What is your name?" In one simple question, Jesus gets a connection to the man. He knows "Legion" is the name of the demons, and he gets a "handle" on them. He is not afraid of them, and they have reason to be afraid of him *because he is not afraid!* It does not take much from Jesus for them to see that they are done with this guy. If he remembers his real name and remembers who he really is – that he is just a person – they don't own him anymore. So they beg Jesus to go anywhere but over a cliff.

Luke has this sly sense of humor, and Jesus can be crafty, too. He grants these demons of evil their wish, and sends them into a herd of pigs. They think they are getting what they want. But then the pigs go crazy and run themselves off the cliff. A kind of ironic justice, you might say, ...except of course for the pigs.

And look what happens to the name-callers. They come running out to see for themselves what the pig-herders had said, and they see the man (they can't call him Legion anymore) clothed and quiet and in his right mind sitting next to Jesus. And what do they do? They ask *Jesus* to leave the country. You tell me whose crazy? The man wants to leave with Jesus, because he is in his right mind and realizes who these people really are. And Jesus says, stay here and live among them and call them by their names. Keep telling them how much God has done for you. It might drive them sane.

Today, we modern sophisticates would say that this man was mentally ill, maybe had multiple personality disorder. We would need to be more modern than talk about demons, but we would still need to label him so we could have a “handle” over him. We might not want to lock him away, but we would want to keep our distance. We would not call him names, but we would put some label on him. He is a hopeless case, so we would just let him be another one of the wandering hopeless homeless that sleep in alleys or dark corners. Over 75% of the homeless in America are mentally ill, and one of their problems is getting an identity card. We are civilized now, and we don’t chain people to the gravestones. We just keep them out of sight or beyond arms length.

What we do to individuals, we also do to groups. We label a group as just evil or different or from another country or whatever. It helps us get a handle on them, makes it easier to keep our distance from them by making them all look alike. “Legion” is everyone we call a name so that we do not have to call them by name, or make a connection that shows we recognize their humanity – or God forbid, establish a relationship with them.

We Christians may no longer believe in demon possession, but we still believe that Jesus has an amazing power over evil and the out-of-order life of humanity. We believe in his mystery that still is risen and at work among us. Christ has the power to healed troubled people and even genuinely evil people – people more like us that we want to admit. We have said that in a world full of illness and trouble and fear and imagination, there is still a Lord who is working to get us to sit beside him and come to our right minds. In a society that is really good at turning fears into imaginative conspiracies and all kinds of craziness as if Legions were after us, the God who is Lord of love and sovereign grace has connected us to a healing power and a miraculous change that can renew our minds and change people.

We Christians say to a modern and complicated world that we still believe that the solutions to demons and difficulties begins with applying the different example of Jesus. We refuse to stay beyond arm’s length or protect ourselves with name-calling. We want to know names, and see people: One person at a time, one need in the moment, one opportunity to do some good, one chance to address what greets us face-to-face. We just imagine what Jesus would do, and do it. Instead of handling or labeling, we see people. We treat others the way we would want to be treated. It’s a golden rule he gave us. We love others, because he first loved us and called us by name.

Sometimes, it is as simple and obvious as telling someone our name and asking, “What is your name?” Maybe there is a place in your life where you are quick to label a person to keep someone beyond arm’s length, or you put individuals into a group that you call names that make them less than people and more like Legions you can isolate and ignore. Maybe we just do something so simple and seemingly innocent as divide the whole world and whoever into “us” and “them.” Maybe we have forgotten that we are all friends to a Savior and Lord who only asks that we do and say what he says and does.

“Jesus” was his name. He let everyone call him Jesus. The name was carefully chosen, given to him, because “he will save his people from their sins.” When Jesus had died for everyone’s sins and rose from the dead to give them new life in their right minds, they gave him a new name – “the name that is above every name.” They called him “Lord,” because they owed their new life to him. And they told everyone wherever they were “what Jesus had done for them.”

Like most all of you, at some time or another people have called me names to try to hurt me. Like most of you, people have tried to call me by name to have power over me or manipulate or use me. Like most of you, I have also had people who welcomed me and asked me my name and listened to my life and wanted to know who I was more than they wanted to label me or dismiss me. Those connections always make me realize my better self and encourage me to live up to my real name. My parents, Lon and Evelyn, named me "David." They told me it was a Bible name that means "loved." I knew I was loved, by them and by God because they told me Jesus loved me. We all know Jesus loves us, and we are all named by God as a child of a faithful Savior and Loving Lord. And being called by name makes us want to tell everyone about how much God has done for us. Like a man a long time ago, I want to ask people their name, listen to their lives, and tell them how much Jesus has done for me.