

Be-Deviled
Luke 8: 26-39
Don Lincoln

Deviled eggs. A rich, creamy finger food that shows up at church potlucks, and family picnics. Some people even have deviled-egg platters designed specifically for serving this tasty version of the incredible, edible egg. But.....who came up with the name? DEVILED eggs? REALLY?

I almost titled this sermon **DEVILED HAM** after reading this story of demons being sent into the pigs. Like deviled eggs, WHO in the world named it deviled ham? When it first came out on the market, why would you buy it, let alone eat it?

Deviled ham is a ground ham spread laden with added spices – hot sauce, cayenne pepper, hot peppers, mustard.... Which makes sense when you look at the original version of Underwood’s deviled ham can. Notice the flames coming out of all the letters....



The obvious connection is between the product and the devil and the heat of hell. I'm sure that's why Underwood put the devil himself on their can. Notice the wicked face, the long claws. Eventually Underwood decided to make the character more friendly. Look at him (can to the right) waving and smiling!! Maybe sales weren't going all that well with Satan on the can! Deviled Ham! Really?



It reminds me of the recent phenomenon of gourmet hot sauces, and their catchy names. Some restaurants have a wall of flames – jars and cans of sauces – names like – **hotter'n'hell**; or **da bomb beyond insanity hot**; or **heartbeat hot sauce** – which I assume runs the risk of cardiac arrest – either that or it will restart your heart without the paddles!

Frankly – I prefer to **TASTE** my food instead of cauterizing my mouth and searing my esophagus. Some sauces simply overpower, absolutely take over food.

Such is the case of the man in our story – he has been overtaken – fully overpowered, possessed by forces that have rendered his life a living hell.

And because of his unruly behavior, the townspeople have tried to lock him up with chains and shackles, but he has always been able to overpower them. Unable to restrain

him, yet unwilling to submit to a demonic force they cannot control, the Gerasenes have pushed him away to the place they feel he belongs—on the edge of society, amidst the tombs, as good as dead. They have not solved the problem, but they have succeeded in pushing it far, far away. Out of sight, out of mind. Sound familiar?

Jesus has traveled to the land of the Gerasenes – He came across the sea of Galilee – perhaps for a break from the pressure of ministry. But there is no peace across the water. This tortured man, possessed by a multitude of spirits, confronts Jesus the minute He steps off the boat and fills the air with his screaming.

“But,” scholar NT Wright says, “Jesus remains calm before this human storm.”¹ I LOVE that description, because immediately before this story, Jesus has quieted the winds and the waves on the lake while they are out on the boat. Like Psalm 65 in our **Call to Worship** – about the authority of God who silences the roaring of the seas, **and the tumult of the peoples**.

The demons in the man recognize Jesus and His power. “What have you to do with us, Son of the most High God?” They are not happy that Jesus has come to their region.

Jesus is not flustered. Jesus asks the man, “What’s your name?” “Legion,” he says. A multitude. But Legion is a military term. Legion is the term for a group of Roman soldiers; namely, about 5,000 strong. This was like saying “My name is battalion.” I wonder if that word choice was specifically chosen. Some scholars suspect this story is not just focused on one man, but on the entire village by the sea. For the land and the people were occupied – were fully possessed and owned by the Romans – and life on the whole was not good.

They had been overrun by the oppressive Roman hierarchy of wealthy men that marginalized slaves, women, and the poor.

There was no mercy in the Roman system of meritocracy, in which you got ahead by privilege, money, status, ethnicity, family. Too bad for you if the forces rendered you poor, or female, or Jewish. Luck of the draw.

When Jesus asks the Legion of demons in this man what they want him to do with them, they beg Him, “Send us into the swine.” Another interesting thing to note. Pigs were unclean. Jews wouldn’t be around them. But there WAS a huge market for pork to feed the occupying Roman army. Forces of oppression often create poor behavior.

Jesus agrees – and as soon as he sends the forces into the swine, the pigs go berserk, run over the cliff into the lake and drown.

But what happens next in this story is a surprise. The people ask Jesus to leave. They don’t celebrate the man’s release from his personal version of Legionnaires disease, and invite Jesus to dinner. They tell Jesus to get out of town. Go away from here!

I think for two reasons: **fear, and economic loss**. They’re afraid. Maybe they’re afraid because the demons have been set loose; maybe the pigs drowned but the demons can swim. Or maybe they’re scared that the man will go crazy again and what will they

do with him. But they're also afraid of Jesus and the display they have seen. Like when Peter sees what Jesus can do and he says, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man." He is fearful. Fear is evoked by the recognition of a power present that even demons listen to; because that's a power that promises to make changes in what's wrong.

But there was also an economic impact to Jesus' action. When they saw what happened, the swineherds ran and told everyone in the town. Of course they did. The pigs were a source of income for the village. In response, the people are not praising God. They are counting the cost of the man's healing, and finding the price is just a little too high. "Go away from us. We don't need any more of that."

I've never preached this text in 39 years of ministry but it struck me. It made me wonder, "Who is this man in our day?" A drug addict, possessed by the cravings of his mind and body? Maybe he's mentally ill, his brain misfiring, sending messages of surreal voices and events that he can't make sense of. Perhaps a war veteran or a refugee, suffering from PTSD, who has a thousand voices of torture, death and dread in his head. Send him away. Put him out there – where he can't bother anybody.

Because, if he's hanging out where I live, there goes the neighborhood. Truth be told, putting the healing of people over neighborhoods has threatened conventional economic thinking in every age. Nothing new.

In the late eighteenth Century, Sabbath Schools were first established. Sabbath Schools which later came to be known as Sunday Schools – were originally designed to keep poor children off the streets and, thus away from a life of crime. The schools taught the children to read, write, do math, and learn the catechism.

Civil and even some church leaders denounced the Sabbath schools and the organizers as disrupting the economic order. They said "The poor would no longer accept their place." Arguments were made that slave trade and child labor were necessary to the economy, and used against those who, as a matter of faith, sought to end these practices with Sunday School.² Subversive Sunday school.

Throughout history there is evidence of how Christian mission had a financial impact on communities, often creating hostility among those whose financial world was shaken by the impact and societal implications of putting the Gospel into practice.³

Fear of the power to change, and concern for personal, economic cost. I wonder how much those same two things possess or occupy our hearts and our minds. How often they so demonize our thinking, our collective mindset as human beings – so consume us that we cannot come to reasonable solutions for early childhood education, health care, mass shootings, equal pay for equal jobs, affordable housing, immigration reform, prison reform, opioid addiction. You name it – we struggle to address it.

How we struggle, and unfortunately, often some people's welfare takes a back seat to conventional economic wisdom. Because we're better with the devil we

know.....because the cost of anything different is unsettling to the way we've managed things – and might cost ME something.

It was a tough week with this text. Many of us are fine having Jesus around until He starts messing with this kind of stuff. This text messes with me.

But let me bring it home to a personal level. I'll go back to the beginning. Some of us get uneasy when the New Testament speaks of demons. Maybe you'd prefer more clinical terms; psychosis perhaps. The problem with that is demonic may not have anything to do with mental illness. A demon in reality is anything that takes control of your life. Like the hot sauce that completely overpowers the food. It doesn't really matter if demons are real – or metaphors – once they've possessed you.

Some things that take over our lives can be good things – like food, or work. But they become demonic at the point they possess us, forcing you and me to lose sight of the whole for the sake of the particular. You and I know it. We could start a list and it would take us the rest of our time to line out all of the things that vie for control of our lives.

And perhaps today, if Jesus asks YOUR name, like this man, you too are unsure how to answer him. You carry a lot of voices around within you. The voice that says work harder; the voice that tells you to feel guilty for what you did; the voices that tell you you're not successful enough, or pretty enough or smart enough. The voices that tell you and me to be afraid; VERY afraid. The voices inside and out that torture us.

So, like this tormented man, we respond to Jesus by saying, "My name is Legion. Jesus, which me do you want? The respectable looking person that shows up for worship? The driven, exhausted person the evil in this world is creating? The anxious, lonely person who can't let anyone know what's really going on inside?"⁴

Jesus comes to town to free you and me from whatever it is that has taken control of our lives – the sin and brokenness that continues to mess with our spirits. Anything that makes you and me less human; less merciful; less than the loving, caring, creative creatures God intends you and me to be. That freedom may cost you and me, but He promises it will be more than worth it! Because of all things, when you and I become new people, we become the possibility and the hope for the redemption of the world to which God sends us. May it be so.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

1. NT Wright, Luke for Everyone, Commentary on Text.
2. Rosalind Banbury, Presbyterian Outlook, November 10, 2008.
3. David Lose, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, commentary on text.
4. Craig Barnes, "When Jesus Says, 'Stay'"; Shadyside Presbyterian Church, June 24, 2007.