

The Crazy Man in the Grave Yard¹

The most interesting and convincing approach to this story in my experience comes from psychologists trained in the exotic school of thought called "family systems" therapy. Family Systems thinkers are not your Dr. Phil types of advice givers. Family Systems people look at how a whole group of people are trying to keep their world in balance. For example, if you put three people in a canoe—and you know how tippy canoes can be—they naturally are going to make sure that they don't tip over by balancing and counter-balancing one another. Family systems people are forever looking for ways that groups are working just to keep the place from falling apart.

The theory would almost assuredly identify the crazy man who lives among the tombs as the community symptom-bearer. Every teacher who is listening to this sermon understands this. You have a youngster in your class room. Suddenly, he or she begins acting disruptively and grades plummet. What is your first hunch? Right! What's going on at home? New baby come into the house. Mom and dad fighting? Financial problems? It's going to be something.

So Jesus arrives on the shore of the non-Jewish land of the Gerasenes and he is confronted by one crazy guy. He runs around

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with nothing on. People have tried to chain him up, but he breaks the chains. Now he's living among the tombs as if his parents and neighbors just want him to die. "Go out there with the dead people.

Jesus talks with this crazy fellow. As we read the dialogue it takes a minute to realize that Jesus isn't talking with the man. He's talking with the collection of demons who possess him. The tipoff that Jesus is talking with demons rather than the person is because the demons always know exactly who Jesus is. People—even the disciples—in the gospel stories are pretty clueless as to who Jesus really is. But right from the beginning the evil spirits and demons who make people sick know exactly who Jesus is and recognize his authority. At length we see this clearly.

The demons possessing the poor man know that Jesus is their spiritual superior. Immediately upon seeing Jesus they are bargaining about the certain banishment that is coming. These demons are not too bright. They make a hasty proposal. "Jesus! Instead of just banishing us to the abyss, why not let us downgrade our accommodations and we'll possess...ah...that drove of pigs over on the hillside." Jesus is content with this bargain. The pigs turn out to be even less desirable to possess than the

poor crazy man. The pigs stampede into the water and pigs and demons drown.

I've always wondered about pigs being herded by herders rather than confined in pens—pig pens. Does this happen? It does. Some pigs graze. They also root and tear up pasture land. So a drove of pigs with herders is plausible. Back in Israel—Kosher territory—we would have had sheep. That's a more satisfying image, a peaceful flock of sheep with a quaint shepherd. But this story is set in the wilds of non-Jewish territory with free-ranging, stampeding pigs.

As we hear this story we think, "If the legion of demons can switch who live in, who did they live in before they got a hold of the young man?" By the way, without a legion of demons messing with his head, and some clothes—I'm envisioning a polo shirt and khaki slacks--this young man turns out to be a pretty decent guy.

But to the question. Who did the demons live in before they got a hold of this young man? Well...almost by way of an answer, there arrives on the scene a mob of the townspeople. These are the neighbors! The aunts and uncles. They see they young man who looks like he just stepped off the ninth green. He looks good. He's sitting at the feet of Jesus like a young apostle. And the neighbors are—I'm not kidding about this—the

neighbors are alarmed. The young man is in his right mind but we don't see grateful parents shouting "Praise the Lord," and throwing themselves on their son crying tears of joy. We see a very tense crowd basically saying to Jesus: "Please, just leave!" It's as if Jesus has no sooner set foot in Gerasa, and he begins to disrupt their way of life. It's as if for the Gerasenes, keeping their children out among the tombs is how they handled their problems. And they didn't need some outsider coming in and stirring that all up.

Now I may be way out on a limb here, but it looks to me like the whole village is demon possessed. There's a toxic atmosphere. The family systems people would have a field day analyzing how the young man is carrying the symptoms of a fairly dysfunctional community. It's real easy to focus on the bizarre behavior of the young man. But for the crowd to be universally upset that he is suddenly okay and want Jesus to leave—that's weird.

So, what's it all mean for us today. Well, let me point out one more very subtle clue. Luke is the writer here and experts tell us that he's using this whole section of his gospel to prepare readers for their own mission ventures. Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. Many of the adventures that the early Christians in Acts ran into were quite similar to the

situations that Jesus encountered. Well, as it turns out, there is a hauntingly similar story in Acts 16 where a demon-possessed girl who could tell the future was pestering the apostle Paul. There's from this demon-possessed child come the words, "Most high God," which is exactly the expression that the demons use in this story. Lots of other similarities link the stories. Healing the possessed person causes economic loss, some townsfolk really don't want the child released from possession and so on.

So what's it all mean? Like Jesus, you and I may well find ourselves working in some very unwholesome situations, where families, or places of work, or communities are quite nasty and confused. Jesus Christ still possesses the power to heal and lift and liberate such situations. You and I may well find ourselves, as Jesus' disciples, called to bring an element of grace to some such situation.

Have you ever been in a situation that can be described in no other way than that it is evil? Evil situations revolve around lies and the application of power and manipulation to enforce compliance. Often the weakest ones in evil situations simply are sick in some way—addicted, or crazy, or sick in some other way. Jesus Christ has power to challenge and banish evil.

As I speak, I think of Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Dutch family the Ten Booms who spoke and acted against Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. These disciples of Jesus Christ were not locked into the vast deception and oppression. They spoke and acted. Their ministry was resisted and brutally suppressed. But they proved to be bearing a truth that challenged staggering power that hurt and destroyed.

We don't have to go to such giants in Christian faith as, say Corrie Ten Boom who stood up against the Third Reich. I'm thinking of the everyday Christians—who won't go along with the wrong around them, who reach out to the people rejected by everyone else, who dare to name the name of Jesus Christ when social pressure makes this awkward or un-cool. These faithful counter-cultural behaviors that God uses to break the power of wrong.

The grand story of the Bible and certainly of our faith is that God is healing and ordering the world that he made. This means that pockets of craziness, oppression, power-politics, and deception will never win. What's more, as we see in Luke's writings, Jesus continues to bring sanity truth, and liberation through his followers—through you and me.

Expect to find yourself in sick situations from time to time where you are the one who will bring liberating sanity.

Maybe you help someone, maybe you speak the obvious truth, maybe you introduce someone to Jesus Christ and that person's conversion disrupts a whole system of craziness. Expect it. And when you're there, know that this is how God has chosen to heal his creation.