

Do Not Disturb

In the name of him in whom we have become children of the heavenly Father, dear friends in Christ: All people resist change. It's natural; but for us Lutherans it seems to be an article of faith, almost like the eleventh commandment: Thou shalt not change! In some ways this is a good quality. The doctrines of our church, for example, are nonnegotiable; just as are the special emphases we place on critical components of our faith such as Christ crucified for sinners, justification by grace alone through faith alone, the infallibility of God's Word, the understanding that all of God's Word is about Christ, and the truth that the Lord Jesus is truly present with us in his Word and Sacraments. We can't change these things. We're right to dig in our heels and refuse to budge.

Sometimes, however, we carry this unwillingness to change over to areas where it isn't desirable. In the early part of the last century there was a huge flap in many of our LCMS churches over conducting worship services in English. By then our German forebears had been operating in this English speaking country for some sixty years. Still, many of them thought that it would be sacrilege to address the Lord in any language but German. But we needn't go back that far for examples of Lutheran resistance to change. Every thirty-five years or so, the Synod produces a new hymnal – ostensibly with the goal of uniting us. Instead, it usually causes congregational civil wars to break out—which are anything but civil as one group wants to hang onto the current hymnal, another wants the new one, and still others want to go back to the hymnal they had before the one they're using now. No, Lutherans don't like to change. And there's one area in particular that we don't like to make any changes. I don't know that it's unique to Lutherans – in fact, it's a universal problem with all sinners – but we especially hate making changes in the way we live our lives.

This brings me to today's Gospel in which we find Jesus and his disciples making a short visit to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. We're about at the midpoint of his ministry. By this time Jesus is well known throughout Galilee. He has a large following that is growing and gaining momentum. Things are going great. And, one day, out of the blue, Jesus says to his disciples, "Let's cross to the other side of the lake." That may not sound strange to us; but it sure would have to the disciples. You see, while they're on the western side they are in what was once Israel, the Promised Land. Here Jewish culture and tradition are still dominant in shaping society. And the people following Jesus are virtually all Jews. That's not the case on the eastern side of the lake. There in the lands of the Gerasenes the people are mostly descendants of Israel's idol-worshipping Syrian enemies. More recently they've adopted a form of pagan Greek culture. So from a Jewish perspective it's a defiled land populated by filthy Gentile dogs who conduct their unholy worship and practice unclean ways of life. In short, it was a place that no self-respecting Jew would want to go. And now Jesus says, "C'mon fellas, let's go check it out." I can't imagine that they were thrilled with the prospect.

To make matters worse, while they were sailing across a furious squall fell on them. The disciples feared for their lives as their boat became swamped and started to sink. They must have thought, "We knew this was a bad idea." Anyway, to cut to the chase, this was the episode in which they had to wake Jesus who was peacefully sleeping through what they believed to be their imminent doom. He casually yawned, stretched, and told the storm to knock

it off. It obeyed his voice at once – which impressed the disciples very much; still, they couldn't have been too happy about making this trip in the first place.

Well, then, as if to confirm their worse concerns about this undesirable journey, as soon as they land the boat on the far shore they're confronted by a violent madman. Picture this guy running down the beach at them, howling like a wounded animal and flailing his arms in a threatening way. He's completely naked and encrusted all over with filth and sores. He's got long matted hair, and bits of bloody raw meat and spittle foam in his greasy, tangled beard. His claw-like fingernails are black with dirt, and his wild, yellow eyes are opened unnaturally wide as they rapidly dart about without seeming to focus on anything. As he draws near, the disciples are nearly knocked over by the stench of his noxious breath and unwashed body. Yeah, he's just the sort of welcoming committee they expected to find in this god-forsaken place.

Which is exactly the point: this guy is the embodiment of all that's wrong with this whole region. Everything about him is defiled and unholy. He's rotten even by the standards of a place where the standards are unacceptably low. And we're given a few details that tell us just how bad it is for him. Many times his countrymen have tried to control him by binding him with iron chains and strong cords. And for good reason: he's a threat to public safety – no telling what harm he might do. No doubt he steals livestock and robs peoples' gardens and orchards to survive. He's a menace to the community. So they've tried to tie him up; but it's no good. No matter what they try they can't hold him with external force because he is captive within to a whole army of demonic spirits. They seem to give him superhuman strength with which he throws off both those who would try to bind him and the shackles that they attempt to place upon him. Driven by these spirits from the fellowship of the living, he finds shelter in the cave-like crypts of the dead. Mark's Gospel adds that he spent his days gouging himself with sharp stones and howling in pain among the tombs. So this is his life: filthy, alone, surrounded by death and decay, and engaged in self-destructive behaviors. He's far beyond the help of any of his countrymen – as utterly lost and hopeless as a person can be.

That is, until Jesus came into his life. Then things begin to change – change radically and for the better. The madman's violent charge toward the disciples is halted as Jesus calmly holds up his hand. And now, with the same ease that he stopped the storm on the lake he starts to still the tempest raging in this man's tortured soul. Jesus commands the unclean spirits to release him and come out. What follows is a fascinating conversation. The demons wheedle and whine as they beg Jesus to leave them alone. They're quite comfortable where they are and they don't want to be disturbed. And perhaps I should take a moment here to clear up a common misconception. Popular images of Satan and the demons portray them as the masters of the underworld. It's like hell is Satan's private kingdom and the demons work for him by tormenting the souls of the people who end up there. That's not the way the Bible describes it. Instead, according to the Scripture, the domain of Satan and the demons is *this* world – at least for the time being. And they're busy here working as much mischief and deception as they can; for they know their days are numbered. They know full well that at the appointed time, on the fast-approaching day of the Lord's glorious return, they will be overthrown and *then* cast down into hell where they suffer eternally – not as the masters of that frightful place; but rather as its most despised prisoners. They know that day is coming and they fear it. That's exactly the basis of the appeal of these demons now in our text. "It's not fair, Jesus. You're too early. Don't send us into the abyss just yet – or at least, we implore you, let us depart into that herd of pigs over there."

A fitting place indeed: unclean animals as a temporary home for unclean spirits. My apologies to Iowa pork producers; but that's the way the disciples would have seen it. They

were Jews, remember. To them the mere presence of the pigs was an offense. And here they had landed not far from where a large herd was grazing on a bluff overlooking the lake. Again St. Mark provides us a little more detail telling us that there were about two thousand pigs in the herd. And again I want to stress that it's part of the overall picture here informing us just how polluted and defiled this land they're visiting is. Surely too it's part of the spiritual message we are to take away from this story that Jesus allows the demons to change their address from a man to a herd of pigs. The point is that he's here to free *people* from Satan's power and the ravages of their own sin; he isn't particularly concerned about livestock – especially what's considered to be unclean livestock. More on that a bit later. The interesting thing here is that even the pigs can't tolerate the presence of demons. They too are driven into self-destructive insanity. Squealing in terror they stampede over the cliff like lemmings into the sea and they drown – all of which foreshadows the eventual final overthrow of Satan, his demons, and all those who are under their influence.

But now here's the part of the story that pertains to us. The swineherds – some of whom were probably nearly trampled while trying to turn the headlong rush of the pigs off the cliff – are naturally shocked and upset at what they've just witnessed. It was scary. And now there's a whole lot of ruined bacon, pork chops, and tenderloins bobbing in the hot sun down there on the surface of the lake. They don't know exactly what happened; but they do know it had something to do with their resident madman and that boatload of strangers down there on the beach. So they run back to town to deliver the bad ag-report and get some reinforcements. Soon a large crowd has gathered around Jesus. They are astonished at what they see. Here's their notorious wild man who's been terrorizing their community for so long sitting peacefully at the feet of Jesus while he teaches. He's been bathed and clothed, he's asking articulate questions, and from time to time there are tears of gratitude welling up in his eyes as he listens to Jesus explain the mysteries of God's kingdom.

The people see all this. They realize that they are in the presence of someone who has incredible power to change what's broken and dysfunctional in the hearts and minds of men. I mean, if he could so vastly improve the life of this guy who was so thoroughly messed up, imagine what he could do for the rest of us. They take all this in—and it scares them. They don't want to be changed. Like the demons themselves, these people don't want to be disturbed. They are happy with their pagan lifestyles. They like their pet sins. They have appetites for unclean things – which are here represented by the pigs; but I hope you see that it's a whole lot more than that. In the restored former madman they are given a glimpse of what their lives could be, the peace and freedom they might have for themselves, and they say, "No. We don't want it. We don't want to be changed." So they beg Jesus to leave them – which, to their present disadvantage and eternal ruin, he does.

In today's Old Testament lesson we hear the Lord calling out, "Here I am ... I spread out my hands all day to a rebellious people who are walking in ways that are not good." That's exactly what he's doing in our text today. He's saying, "Here I am. I'm here to help you. I'm here to set you free from those habitual sins that oppress you, that put you into conflict with the people you love, that are forms of self-destruction, that prevent you from being the kind of person that God wants you to be. Just look and this man and you'll see what I can do for you." And they turn him down cold. They hang out the "Do not disturb" sign to Jesus in the land of the Gerasenes. They are comfortable with the status quo. They don't want to change.

The question I'd ask you to grapple with this morning is this: What and where are the lands of the Gerasenes in your life? In what areas have you said to Jesus, "Do not disturb". No, I'm not suggesting that anyone here is possessed by demons; but each one of you does

have an unclean spirit dwelling within: it's your own sinful nature. And I'm willing to bet that each one of you has marked off a certain amount of territory for it. It's a place where the disciple of Jesus in you doesn't want to visit; but that's okay with you. You've made a certain treaty with it. As long as it stays over on its side and keeps away from the territory you've marked off as your "spiritual side", well, then it can do what it wants. It can go on satisfying whatever unholy appetites it desires. Now, I can't tell you what and where those places are in your life; but I am certain that you know. I am even more certain that Jesus knows. And the main point of this morning's lesson is that Jesus wants to visit them. He wants to go there with you and make changes – radical changes for the better. And it's precisely here that our unchanging Lutheran doctrine works to our advantage, because we believe that Jesus is here, that he is truly present with us in his Word and Sacraments, and that through them he deals with us personally and with power to overcome, cast out, and destroy the unclean sinful spirit within us. He is here with the full force of his death for sin and his glorious resurrection to set us free, to forgive us our sins, and to restore us to a right mind and a holy way of life. Take down the "do not disturb" sign wherever it is that you've got it posted and welcome him. He will change you. He will change you in ways that you cannot possibly change yourself. And then, like the man in our story, you too will be able to go forth declaring what great things Jesus has done for you. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!