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June 23, 2019

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Luke 8:26-39

## UNSETTLING GODLY WORK

Most of us admire power, but we are also unsettled by it when others have more of it than we do. We admire love, but we are also a bit unsettled by it when others have more of it than we do. Power and love have a fascinating interplay in many arenas. In the last year of his life, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”<sup>1</sup>

Elijah has been viewed as the most powerful of the Hebrew prophets. There are a number of miraculous works that God carried out through him. He was committed to ridding Israel of the worship of false idols, and with his great contest with the prophets of Baal, God provided the fire power engulfing a sacrificial offering in flames. The prophets of Baal were humiliated, but Elijah didn't just defeat them - he killed them. So, we might say he was stronger with power than he was with love. But with this act and all of the powerful works with which he was involved, Elijah was not more powerful than a bout of depression that descended upon him, even after, particularly after a number of significant accomplishments. Under threat from Queen Jezebel, he sits down under a solitary broom tree and his personal resources seem to be exhausted. In his struggle, he feels all alone and he is confused about his purpose. Here was one of the great figures from the Hebrew scriptures, who seemingly is suffering from a lack of mental health in the form of depression.

God's power and love reach out to Elijah in a caring way, with angels making sure he was eating and getting what he needed when he couldn't or wouldn't care for himself. He then is led on a pilgrimage to Horeb, which is another name for Mount Sinai, where God had met Moses in a significant way. God asks a question to get Elijah to explore his purpose and allows the prophet to express his frustrations.

God then shows him that the divine presence isn't necessarily in that which is outwardly powerful and destructive, a mighty wind, an earthquake, a fire. These were the kind of earthshaking acts Elijah had sought to carry out. Rather, God's presence here is revealed in the sound of sheer silence. In this powerful, loving presence, God enables him to understand that he is not alone, and that there is a purpose and perhaps a new methodology for him as God then sends him where he is needed.

We hear of another person in our reading from Luke who most would describe in modern terms as being mentally ill, perhaps with schizophrenia. Jesus and his disciples had just crossed the Sea of Galilee and they land in the region of the Gerasenes, a Gentile area on the east coast. There, they are approached by this man who has the power of great physical strength, but he has no power to control a large destructive presence within him. As a result, he runs around unclothed and has nowhere to live but among the tombs. The townspeople, lacking either power or love, try to bind the man with chains and shackles, and they place him under guard, but the man's physical power is so great that he breaks his chains and he cannot be contained. So, the mentally-disturbed man becomes a disturbing presence along the coastline that the townspeople come to sort of tolerate as just the way things are.

The numerous expressions of brokenness within the man call out when Jesus approaches him saying, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." The power and love emanating from Jesus were unsettling to this inner brokenness. Jesus speaks directly to the disturbance within the man, asking its name. The response is "Legion," which was a description of a unit of three to six thousand soldiers in the Roman army. The Romans were occupying Palestine at this time in the same way this massive destructive presence within the man was occupying him. One thing about a legion; it would follow the orders of its commander. And Jesus, as the one in charge, commands that legion of brokenness to come out of the man. But where would it go? Jesus did not want this brokenness to inhabit some other person. It asks to go into a large herd of swine, which Jesus allows. We then see how wildly destructive this brokenness was that had been within the man, as the Legion of brokenness goes into the swine and causes the whole herd to run off a steep bank and drown in the

sea. How's that for herd mentality? The healing of the man with the mental illness does not come without a cost.

Just as the reactions of this inner brokenness to Jesus' presence was intense, so too were the reactions of the townsfolk to Jesus, being there in their midst. There is an opportunity for the whole town to be transformed by Jesus' powerful, loving presence. But that's not how it plays out. Those who oversaw the swine run into town to tell the people what happened. They did not want to be blamed for the deaths of the pigs. When the townspeople, in curiosity, come to see for themselves, they find the man who had not been controllable even by chains, sitting at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind. We might think that they would be happy that this man who had caused them so much trouble had been healed, and he was now sane and whole. But there is no celebration that is going to happen here. Whereas the man had been seized by dominating spirits, the townspeople are seized by fear in response to what has happened. The status quo for them had not been great, with a crazed, naked man running around, yet their understanding of how things worked and didn't work had reached a level of balance. And even with the problems he had caused, he helped them feel better about themselves, thinking that the gods must be punishing him, but weren't punishing them. And then there was the economic loss of the herd of swine. They decided Jesus had no business getting into their business and they came to a quick decision, perhaps through another expression of herd mentality, to ask this powerful, loving, Godly presence to leave town because he was a danger to their way of life. Actually, they were right about that. Jesus' power and love can be quite unsettling.

English novelist and essayist Dorothy Sayers described those who try to keep Jesus from being someone who turns lives upside down in this way: "The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore; on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek and mild,' and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies." <sup>2</sup>

Sometimes, we do act as if we are trying to put Jesus in chains and put a guard on him to try to contain his dynamic loving power from overturning the status quo, broken as it is, but something with which we have gotten comfortable. There are times when we want Jesus to stay out of our business. Sometimes, we prefer an image of a meek and mild Jesus, who will protect us from the awesome and loving power of God, so we can be left essentially unchanged. The frightened townspeople asked the dynamic, life-altering Jesus to leave. They, too, needed to be freed from what was binding them. I hope we won't follow their example.

The story concludes with the man who has been healed wanting to go with Jesus back across the Sea of Galilee. Although Jesus does not force himself upon the townspeople, neither does he give up on them. He knew this man was uniquely qualified to be a witness that what had happened to him by God's grace, was good news. That the man had room in his heart for the townspeople who had demonized him, was indication that the man had been truly transformed. Can't you imagine he would tell them, "I understand your fear of the changes Jesus could bring, but I wouldn't go back to the brokenness of who I was before he came, for anything."

Perhaps his witness would be the same message for you and me. We can be bound by bitterness, fear, anger, all of which over time, can actually lead to mental illness, or certainly that drives action that can block the healing of those who suffer from mental illness. The gospel is pretty clear that Jesus' power works against everything that stands against love. We can view that as something of which to be frightened, that we would choose to send away from us, or we can receive this divine liberating, unsettling presence, working within our midst. How different the story would have played out if the townspeople had thrown a celebration of their fellow townsman's healing, and opened themselves to be rid of that which stood against love. How different our story will be if we are open to God's power to work against everything in our lives that stands against love. Jesus has landed on our shores. We've got some decisions to make.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. (Aug 17, 1967), "Where Do We Go from Here?" Annual Report Delivered at the 11<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference: Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, The Greatest Drama Ever Staged, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938.