

# **“What is your name?”**

Luke 8:26-39

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Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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<sup>26</sup> Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes,<sup>[a]</sup> which is opposite Galilee. <sup>27</sup> As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn<sup>[b]</sup> no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. <sup>28</sup> When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”—<sup>29</sup> for Jesus<sup>[c]</sup> had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) <sup>30</sup> Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. <sup>31</sup> They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

<sup>32</sup> Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons<sup>[d]</sup> begged Jesus<sup>[e]</sup> to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. <sup>33</sup> Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

<sup>34</sup> When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. <sup>35</sup> Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. <sup>36</sup> Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. <sup>37</sup> Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes<sup>[f]</sup> asked Jesus<sup>[g]</sup> to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. <sup>38</sup> The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus<sup>[h]</sup> sent him away, saying, <sup>39</sup> “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Let me ask you something, and this question is really the theme for my sermon today: **How well do you handle change?**

Change is wonderful when it happens to other people, right? Don't you love it when other people make necessary changes in their lives, changes you have been hoping and praying that they will make?

I can handle that kind of change very, very well. The other kind, though, the kind of change that involves me and my life ... not so much.

Change is almost universally uncomfortable. No one likes change, as the old expression goes, except for babies with wet diapers.

Every for the last dozen years I have attended a worship conference in the U.S. It's been much more difficult to attend since I moved here, but until the move I went to this conference just about every year for 12 years. What happens is that churches – sometimes campus ministries or other organizations, but mainly churches – which have applied for worship renewal grants or funding come together to talk their projects and how those projects went over the last year.

Without going into too much detail, I serve on the board of an organization that gives away money – a great deal of money, as a matter of fact – to churches that want to make their worship better or more vital than it currently is. And every year the board reads a hundred or so grant applications, and then we fund about a third of them, giving away hundreds of thousands of U.S. dollars every year.

And in mid-June – I am not able to attend this year – but in mid-June the grant recipients come together and tell their stories. They worship together and attend seminars, but mainly the event is for them to tell their stories. And what happens is thrilling and inspiring, and every year I would leave to go back to my own congregation with new energy and new passion, because of the stories I had heard, because of what God is doing in so many places around the world.

Can you guess the number one issue on the minds of most grant recipients when they come together? I'll give you a hint: It wasn't the great idea that they came up with, the idea that won them as much as 15,000 USD in grant money. In fact, it was never the money.

Instead, what seemed to be on the minds of all grant recipients was how to get their churches to change.

Every person at this event – and there were two hundred or so of us – every person had been awarded a substantial amount of money because of some imaginative, innovative, creative idea. Some of them – and I know this because I read all of the grant proposals – some of the ideas were breath-taking in their imagination. In case you were wondering, the church in the world today is alive and working at a very high level when it comes to worship.

The problem – and the leader of every organization, committee, bank, board, institution, and family knows this to be true – the problem is convincing everybody else what sheer genius your idea is.

The grant review board can easily spot genius. Every year we quickly come to agreement on the best grant proposals. But getting people to go along with your idea? That's the hard work.

If there had been a course offered during my seminary training on managing change in a complex organization, I would have signed up for it. Forget New Testament. Forget church history. Anybody can read about that. It's knowing how to lead people through change that pastors really ought to know how to do.

Anyway, I've done a fair amount of reading over the years about change – how to introduce it, how to win support for it, and so on. There's a lot of literature out there about change. But maybe no stories are as helpful as the stories found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

You can't imagine how much important information you find there.

I don't know if you have ever thought of it this way or not, but Jesus introduced more change during the course of his brief ministry – and I'm talking about deep-level change – than anyone in history. Just think about that. How many historical figures, for example, can you name who have changed the way we describe time – before Christ and after Christ. It's breath-taking when you think about it.

In just 30 years he introduced change on such a large scale that history itself had to be described in a different way – believers and non-believers alike.

The change Jesus introduced turned *individual* lives upside down. But maybe even more impressive, he turned whole villages upside down (as we heard in the reading for today). And frankly he turned the whole nation of Israel upside down. And then later, as you know (it took a few hundred years), the entire Roman Empire was changed.

was not in question for him. As far he was concerned, the man was demon possessed, and the story continues.

What Luke wants us to see, I think, is that the village has a problem – a serious, heart-breaking problem. They know this man. They've known him since he was a child. His parents, his brothers, his sisters. By way of background for this story I read for you today, Jesus was almost always in motion. If he stopped, it was never for very long. He would stop along the road, heal somebody, tell a story, or ask an utterly disarming question – and then off he would go leaving people with no choice but to react or adjust or change.

And they did this, as you know, with varying degrees of success. Some people were thrilled, of course, but as we heard in the story today, many more were not thrilled at all. They were afraid ... or in some cases they were angry, both common reactions to change.

The one thing you can count on, though, is that no one was ever quite the same after Jesus passed by.

So, in the story I read for today, Jesus comes to the country of the Gerasenes, which is on the far side of the Sea of Galilee – not quite the Golan Heights, but in the direction of what is now Syria.

It's not quite clear why he went there. It's Gentile territory, as the story tells us. Between "the tombs" and the pigs, there was a great deal about this place that was not right for a Jew.

When we were in Israel a few months ago, our guide said that Jesus had to leave Capernaum because he no longer felt safe there, which was a theory I had never heard before. The gospels do not tell us that, not explicitly.

All we know is that Jesus and his disciples took a boat ride across the lake. And when the boat arrived on the other side, a man from the city came out to meet Jesus.

The man wore no clothes. He was homeless. He lived mainly in the cemetery outside of the town. More than once, the townspeople had tried to tie him down with chains, but he would break out of whatever they used to subdue him and then, as the story puts it, he would **"be driven by the demon [his personal demon] into the wilds."**

Now, let me ask you something: Is there anyone who thinks this is a good situation? Raise your hand!

Okay, then, tell me this: Why did they put up with it? How could they live with this awful situation – day in and day out, year in and year out? Their children must have been terrified. It sounds horrible.

You know, there are going to be some people who read this story and who prefer to have a conversation about demonic possession and exorcism. There are going to debate the issue of demon possession versus mental illness. Some of us would really like to figure out exactly what was bothering this man.

In fact, I have had those conversations myself. And, just so you know, I think they're interesting. I think I mentioned in a sermon one time that early in my ministry I wanted to explain demon possession in terms of mental illness. I figured that these first century people were primitive and didn't know better. But now, of course, we are far more sophisticated, and we understand things like mental illness.

But do you know something? After a few years, I came to the conclusion that these first century people may have known more about the spiritual life than we do. I think they sometimes had a far better appreciation for the reality and power of evil in the world.

Anyway, as I reflect on this story, it seems clear that none of that matters. None of that helps us get at the truth which is at the heart of this story. None of that was an issue for Luke. The man's mental state – they all live in the village, plus some aunts and uncles and cousins. They were all somehow related to each other.

And no one seems to know what to do. And so, the problem goes on and on, year after year, getting more desperate as time goes by.

Here's the thing about problems like these: we will do just about anything to preserve the status quo, to keep things as they have always been, rather than taking the necessary steps to change.

Many of us have family members – or we know people who have family members – who are ill, mentally ill, chemically dependent, demon possessed. Or, these family members can be bullies, who get their way by frightening everyone around them. Or, these people can be needy and passive. That’s how they get their way.

And all too often what happens in these families? Well, they live with it. They aren’t happy about it, of course. But they live with it. And often they expend enormous amounts of energy ... to do what? To pretend that it’s really a manageable problem, that’s it not so bad, that it’s their cross to bear. And they say, **“Well, every family has its problems.”**

Last weekend Jim Bultema, our retreat leader explained to us that when the Bible speaks about having a cross to bear, it’s not a reference to a difficult relative. According to the Bible, when you pick up your cross and follow Jesus, it means just that. You are on your way to die.

What’s happening here in this story is something very different. Let me put it this way.

A son or daughter will marry, and the new son-in-law or daughter-in-law will be introduced into the family system – and with a fresh pair of eyes and ears will see how things go in this new family. And the new son-in-law or the new daughter-in-law might say, if they’re brave, **“Oh my. What have I gotten myself into? Something’s not right in this family. Don’t you see what’s happening here?”**

But of course everyone *can* see it. It’s just that everyone has decided that living with the problem is far easier than tackling it head on. Why? I’m not sure, but the fear of change is very powerful. And so is fear of the unknown.

It’s astonishing to me how far many families or organizations or businesses or even churches will go to excuse bad behavior. We’ll smile uncomfortably when someone points it out to us. But we’ll change the subject as soon as we can.

Look, every family does have its problems. But wouldn’t we choose life and health and vitality over dysfunction. Who wants to live their lives walking on egg shells, never knowing when the next explosion will occur?

So, back to Jesus. And I wonder if you’ve ever noticed this about him before. He came to bring life, but the way many people perceived it at the time was that he came to stir up trouble. He really didn’t want that, of course, but that’s how people saw it.

One time he seemed to realize this role he was playing, and he acknowledged it. He said: **“I came not to bring peace, but the sword.”** Just by speaking the truth, just by poking his nose into unhealthy situations, he made people uncomfortable.

But not everyone. And it’s important for us to see that. Some people were set free. One of my all-time favorite gospel stories – I have a lot of them – but one of my favorites is the one about the invalid by the pool at Bethsaida. There was this man who had made a career out of being an invalid. He had been there

at the pool for 38 years. It was his whole identity. He had printed up business cards. Not really! But he apparently made a decent living at it.

And Jesus came up to him one day and asked such a wonderful question. Jesus looked at him and said, **“Do you want to be well?”** What a wonderful question! Jesus always had this way of getting right to the point. In our story for today, Jesus said to the demon-possessed man, **“What is your name?”**

And as you know, the man at the pool (to his everlasting credit) saw his opportunity and seized it. So, some people, including the man in our story, were given a whole new life, and some of them couldn't help but sing and dance and tell everyone what had happened to them.

It's the others I'm thinking about today, the ones who were so threatened by change that they wanted to throw Jesus out.

Let me point something out to you that I don't think I saw in this story the first time I read it. Who did the people of this village, who did the people of this village ask to leave?

Was it the demon-possessed man (who seems to fade into the background at the end of the story)? He was the one, after all, who had made their lives so miserable. He was the one who caused them to live in a perpetual state of fear.

No, strangely enough, it was Jesus. When it was all over, they said, **“Would you please go...and leave us alone?”** There was no thank you, no sense of relief. Just: **“Please go.”**

Jesus was a truth teller in this situation, but truth tellers are almost never honored. Think about it.

Whoever says **“thank you”** to the member of the family who finally can't take it anymore, who decides that another Christmas is not going to be ruined, who stands up to the bully in the family, who says, **“Next year, I'm going to do it differently, and you're welcome to join me.”**

Usually there's a price to be paid for doing that. The last thing people in an unhealthy family want to hear is someone speaking the truth. It's too upsetting ... because it asks us to change.

**If you're one of those lonely people who has dared to tell the truth – and has suffered the consequences for doing it – you should know that you have a friend in Jesus.** When he said, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life,”** we don't usually stop to think how much he suffered because of it.

So, I realize that all of this may sound difficult. You might be thinking, **“When exactly does this start to sound like good news?”**

And for that matter, I would add, **“Where is the good news in this little story?”**

Well, as is often the case with the good news, we don't see it right away. You might think that it should be obvious, but it almost never is ... not right away.

The women and the disciples on Easter morning were feeling what? Mostly they were feeling afraid. It was only later, as the sun rose higher in the sky, that what happened began to seem remarkably good. At the first light of dawn, things looked sad and confusing, but later in the day the truth had become plain. And then it was good.

So, like it or not, that's often how truth works.

Let me give you two ways that change can become good news for us, and these are true no matter who we're talking about – families, churches, businesses, organizations you belong to, a Verein, any group at all.

**And here's the first one:** change will become possible, people will embrace change, people will even celebrate change, when they're able to imagine a better future.

I think the number one reason people resist change is that they can't quite imagine what the future will be like. And I think the number one reason that Jesus told parables about the kingdom of God was to give us a glimpse of how things could one day be.

At that worship conference I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon, I met a pastor whose name is the Rev. Bonnie Orth. She was serving a 200-year-old Presbyterian church in New York state – a 200 years old church is ancient by U.S. standards – and her church had been struck by lightning and had burned to the ground.

Bonnie is a remarkably gifted person and a faithful servant of God. She saw in that situation what no one else could see. She saved a charred beam from the ruins of the old church, and she commissioned a local artist to turn it into a cross – why? – because she was already imagining the new worship space. And that cross, made out of a remnant from the old church, would be a reminder that God brings us from death to resurrection, from ashes to new life. That was her grant project, that was why she applied for grant money, that was how I came to know her.

She also saved hundreds of pieces of glass from what had been priceless stained glass windows. And on Easter morning everyone who came to church was given a shard of glass, and at some point in the service everyone came forward and laid that shard of glass on the communion table.

And Bonnie said to her congregation, at that first worship service in the new building, **“What was broken has become whole at this Table, at the Table of our Lord.”** The same artist who fashioned the charred beam into a cross made a new table top with all of those pieces of glass. And I must say, it was quite a beautiful thing.

She had given them a vision for the future, and most of them went for it and embraced it. On Easter morning this year – after two years of meeting in the Gemeindehaus, the city hall – they moved into their new sanctuary. It wasn't the beautiful, 200-year-old building that they had known all their lives, but the new one was beautiful in its own way – and in many ways it's a far better building for ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

So, what allows us to change and move forward? It's a glimpse into the future. It's the trust that God has something in mind for us, something that will be far better than we can think or imagine right now.

**And here's the other way change becomes good news.** People will embrace change when they that they are loved unconditionally.

In a previous church I served I had been working with a man whose life and family were coming apart because of his drinking, his alcoholism. I was as direct with this man as I have ever been with anyone in my life. I was a young pastor at the time and didn't know how direct I could be.

When his wife called, I would go and pick him up at the bar and say, **“Pete, your life is a mess. You can't keep going like this.”**

I had never said that to anyone before, and I never wanted to say anything like that. They were some of the hardest words I've ever spoken to another human being.

Well, one Sunday morning, I had just arrived at the church. It was early, and I was still in my car when my cell phone rang. It was Pete. And Pete wanted me to know that he was one week sober and that he had the most amazing sponsor from his Alcoholics Anonymous group.

Pete said, **“You'll never guess what my sponsor said to me. He looked me in the eye and he said, ‘Pete, your life is a mess. You can't keep going like this.’”**

And naturally, I thought, **“Well, Pete, I said that to you too.”**

But this time it was different. Why? He was in a group of people who showed him unconditional acceptance and love. He could hear it from them in a way he couldn't hear it from me.

For the first time in his life he could imagine a new life, he could imagine that change was possible. And like many people before it, he went for it.

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I don't know where you are right now – or what's going on in your life. And maybe things for you couldn't be better. If so, I'm so glad.

But if you are not in a good place, if you are not experiencing what Jesus called “abundant life,” then it's possible something needs to change.

I know that change is hard. Trust me on this. I can be and have been one of most stubborn people God has ever placed on the planet. So, take it from me that you do not have to stay where you are. You are worthy of so much more. God created you for so much more than you're experiencing right now.

Could it be that Jesus has walked up to you this morning and has said, “What is your name? Do you want to be healed?”

If you say, **“Yes, but it's so complicated...”** and you start to give the long litany about why things will never change, the moment will have passed and Jesus will be on his way again.

So, I'm thinking it's time to say, **“Yes, I'm ready, here I am, what should I do?”**

The future which I know you can't see right now, the future which God has in mind for you, will be good.

In fact, it will be better than you can possibly imagine ... mainly because you will be free of whatever weighs you down right now.

That choice is yours.

