Sunday, February 21, 1988
LEAVING THE TOMBS BEHIND
Mark 5:1-20

Today we begin a series of sermons for Lent. Each will be based on one of the healing stories of Jesus as remembered by the early church and then written down in one of the Gospels.

In the Bible story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had gone to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, to the country of the Gerasenes. The people who lived there were Gentiles, not Jews.

As soon as Jesus and his disciples got out of the boat, they were met by a man who is described as being possessed by a demon, or an "unclean spirit." He was not in control of himself but seemed to have been taken over by some other alien power.

Haven't we felt that way at times, either about ourselves or about others? Saying that an individual or group is in the control of an evil spirit is quite descriptive.

Think of a person addicted to drugs. The demons have him. Think of the illness of alcoholism and how that drug completely controls the lives of some people. It's like an outside power has taken hold of them, and it has. Think of a person who becomes part of a group that leads him or her astray, or in some instances, even joins a satanic cult.

The imagery in this story is very descriptive. Primitive people had respect for the mystery and power of evil. They were conscious that they were sometimes in conflict with powers much greater than themselves. Thus, the imagery or belief in demons is an attempt to cope with the mystery of evil, chaos, and destruction, all of which do exist.

As a result, the community in which this man lived did not know what to do with him. They had tried to bind him with chains, but that was unsuccessful. He kept breaking the chains. There seemed to be no way they could control him, so he had been banished from the community — put away, out of sight, and now he lived among the tombs, in the caves along the sea where the dead were often buried.

This morning, for a moment, put yourself in this man's place. Everyone in your community is convinced that you are possessed by an evil spirit. You are considered to be crazy. First, your family has tried to keep you hidden in the back of the house by tying you up with chains. Frequently, even today, we think we can solve a problem by hiding it. Or we think we can take care of a problem by using force, by tying it up with chains or locking it up in a jail or mental institution. But you are too strong for them. Finally, you are taken out of town and left among the tombs. There you have to get along as best you can.

You want to be rid of your illness, and yet you don't. Many people take refuge in sickness. When life gets too much for them, they become ill. Remember, you are a product of the culture of your time. You have been told that you are possessed by an evil spirit, and you believe it. Your life has lost all meaning and focus. You are convinced that you are no longer in control of yourself at all.

It is fitting that you now spend most of your time among the tombs because the demonic in this world is frequently found among the tombs, among the relics of the past. I meet people all the

time who are living among the tombs. Some people live only in the past, in the cemetery, and thus are no good to themselves or to others. The past weighs them down and holds them back. They cannot let go of their bad memories and thus live among the tombs.

Others cannot let go of a bad habit and thus live among the tombs.

Still, others cannot forgive someone who has wronged them and are thereby living among the tombs.

Whenever we give ourselves over to an alien power, we are in effect living among the tombs, and that alien power or unclean spirit can be hate, or alcohol, or some other habit-forming drug.

Then Jesus came ashore and met the individual who was living among the tombs, and the first response of the man with the demon was—"Don't torment me! Leave me alone!" Isn't that an unusual reaction?

We might have expected him to say, "Thank God you are here. Free me from these demons that keep me among the tombs."

But that expectation does not take seriously how we are all wedded and adjusted to our demons and how painful it is to have them exorcized. Without the demons, we would have to be held responsible for our own actions. "The devil made me do it," is the way Flip Wilson used to put it. Or a drinking alcoholic can say, "It was the alcohol that made me mistreat you." "It was the alcohol that got me into trouble."

What strange creatures we are; we so often would rather be destroyed than have our evil spirits named and called out for what they are. So we practice denial. We say, "I don't have a problem. It's all those others who have problems." "Don't torment me. Don't help me to change." The cry shows how difficult it is for any of us to change, even when the change will make our life better.

What did Jesus do? He asked the voices, the demons in the man to name themselves, and by so doing, Jesus was saying—"I know who you are." Jesus was acting on the assumption that there is a power in simply naming a demon or in having a demon identify itself. So, for example, when an individual who has the disease of alcoholism is finally able to say, "I am an alcoholic," the demon has been named, and that is the beginning of getting well.

Demons are invincible until they are known. But once they are named, then we can get at them.

There is power in "naming." The very act of naming has a therapeutic effect, not only with demons but with any disorder. In a book entitled The Mind Game, with the subtitle, Witchdoctors and Psychiatrists, the author, a psychiatrist and anthropologist, points out the importance of naming or diagnosis. In this very act, the patient's anxiety is decreased by the knowledge that a respected and trusted therapist understands what is wrong. When we know what something is, then we can usually deal with it more effectively.

It is sometimes called the "Principle of Rumpelstiltskin," the word being taken from the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, which illustrates the magic of the right word or naming. You remember the story. Rumpelstiltskin is the name of an evil man who wants to take the Queen's baby. The

only way the baby can be saved is by the Queen discovering his name. At the last moment, she finds the right name — Rumpelstiltskin, whereupon the baby is saved, and the Queen lives happily ever after. By learning his name, she gains power over him.

The naming process can be one of the most important components of all forms of healing. Every therapist who has ever had the experience of observing a patient's relief after solemnly telling her that she was suffering from idiopathic dermatitis or pediculosis knows how important the name is. It says to the patient that someone understands, that she is not alone with her illness or problem, and that implicitly there is a way to get well.

Naming or diagnosis is equally important and is a relief to the therapist because now he or she knows what treatment process to follow, if any.

Naming and identification are important in all parts of our living. We cannot solve problems until we name them, identify them, until we diagnose what the problems are.

This is especially true in dealing with the power and influence of evil — we need to be able to name the evil, identify it, before we can go to work eradicating it. There are times when the naming process is the most challenging part of dealing with a problem. It's not always easy to tell the difference between what is good and what is evil.

Jesus healed the man. He restored him to his right mind. The demons were called out of him. And here, there's a little story within the story. (Most Biblical commentators believe that this is a little folk tale that was added to the story.) The demons asked Jesus not to let them wander around aimlessly but rather to allow them to enter the herd of swine feeding there on the hillside. Jesus allowed them to do so, and the swine rushed down the hill headlong into the lake and were drowned.

All the commotion caused the swineherds to run back to the nearest town to tell others what had happened. Soon a crowd of people from the village came to see for themselves.

But did they come with joy and celebration at such a healing having taken place? I should say not. They came with a mixture of curiosity and fear and ended by telling Jesus to get out of their neighborhood. "And they came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind... and they were afraid. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their neighborhood."

They were afraid! Apparently, they feared sanity more than insanity. This is not as unusual as it sounds. Many people today and through the years, concerned for the continuation of some existing order or custom or belief, either because it works to their advantage, or because of the dead weight of inertia, fear sanity far more than the perpetuation of delusion. They are afraid of people knowing the truth. The believers in white supremacy, for example, feared sanity, the truth of all people being created equal. People may prefer the insanity of nuclear war to the sanity of nuclear arms reduction.

It is easy for us to be indignant about people like these villagers who preferred the evils of disorder to the sanity of mind and spirit. But we need to look at ourselves to see if we are infected with the same fears. There are times when we too want Jesus to leave our neighborhood because what he does and teaches threatens our usual way of doing things and our usual way of seeing the world.

But what of the man who was healed? He wanted to leave his country and go with Jesus. How absolutely natural. If he could go with Jesus, his life would be safe. He wouldn't have to face the people back home as a changed person. He wouldn't have to face their non-acceptance. It's difficult to re-enter a community as a sane person when you've been thought of as being insane for a long time. It's difficult for all of us to accept the fact that someone has changed and is now a different person.

Jesus, however, would not let this healed man escape his responsibility. He told him, "Go home to your friends and neighbors and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you." Go and help others. Use your newly gained health on behalf of others. It's not enough to be converted and revel in your new vision — go home to your friends. Put your new vision into service.

This story is about all of us. Each one of us, in our own way, can be healed, and we can leave the tombs of the past which hold us back. God calls each of us to leave the tombs behind and to move on. Amen.