Sunday, June 24, 2001
BOUND TO BE FREE
Luke 8:26-39

There are few forms of illness that cause more distress, misunderstanding, and social stigma than those associated with a deranged mind. Throughout history, people have tended to assign supernatural causes to mental illness. The term “lunatic” suggests this, connecting mental illness or bizarre behavior with the influence of lunar forces like the moon. Many times, too, people who are mentally ill are said to be possessed by one or more demons. The cure then, according to beliefs in exorcism, is to drive out the demon. Stories like the movie “The Exorcist” are based on this assumption. The imagery or belief in demons is an attempt to cope with the mystery of mental illness, evil, chaos, and destruction, all of which do exist.

In 1983, Dr. M. Scott Peck, a respected psychiatrist, published a book titled People of the Lie. The main subject of the book is the reality and power of various forms of mental illness and human evil. In that book, he also describes his participation in several exorcisms. He writes of the mysteriousness of these cases and comes to this conclusion: such cases are rare. Human evil, on the other hand, is common. “On the basis of two cases alone, I am simply not able to offer a broad, in-depth, scientific presentation on the subjects of evil spirits, possession, and exorcism. It is an old maxim of science that once you answer a question, others immediately take its place.” One of his conclusions is, however, that there are a few people who are so mentally deranged and so evil that the only explanation is that they are possessed by an evil spirit, and therefore the only cure is some kind of exorcism.

The man in this story from Luke’s gospel is so uncontrollable and irrational that he is said to be possessed by many demons. However, he is not necessarily an evil man. As far as we know, he has committed no crime or harmed anyone. In today’s psychiatric terms, he might be described as a person with a multiple personality disorder. He was homeless and wild. He lived among the tombs, that is, the caves in which dead bodies were buried. A religious Jew, knowing of this man, would be scandalized by the fact that his home was the cemetery. That would make him ritually unclean. He would be considered as far removed from God as any human being could be.

He was shunned by others. It was a natural assumption for his neighbors to conclude that he was under the control of alien spirits who wanted to do him harm, and they were afraid that he could also harm them.

We have a picture here of an individual in total bondage. He was so tormented that he couldn’t live peacefully with other people. He was out of his mind, confused and full of suffering. He would cry out, night and day, as he gashed himself with stones, seeking to find some relief for his mental anguish. While he threw off all outward restraint, he was unable to control what was going on within.

There are two important questions to consider with this story. First, why did the early church remember it and write it down? Second, in what way does it relate to your life and mine in today’s world? In other words, what can we learn from it that will enrich our own relationship to God and to each other?

I think the early church remembered this story because this man represents, in an extreme fashion, something which many of us experience to some degree — that is, we too suffer from

some sort of bondage. Oftentimes that bondage is caused by our human frailty, which can lead to our being addicted to some activity or behavior that causes harm. The courses of addiction vary in degree. I am not suggesting that we are exactly like this possessed man, but behind the outward facade of apparent wholeness in many people, there is nonetheless a brokenness inside. There is a struggle. There is confusion. There is doubt. There is pain. There is a kind of bondage.

The story is filled with powerful imagery. It tells us that the demonic in this world is often found among the tombs, among the relics and prejudices of the past. People continue to base their behavior on false assumptions they have inherited and not questioned. For example, here is an individual who grew up in a culture and family tradition of racism and still lives in those tombs of the past.

Perhaps as a child you used to play a game called “let’s pretend.” What made the game so much fun was that anything was possible. You could become anything you wanted to be. You could be on a pirate ship. You could be an astronaut. The possibilities were endless.

To a certain degree, we still like to pretend, and it’s not necessarily bad. It’s wonderful to dream and to have a vision of what we hope to become.

But there is another sense in which you can play the game “let’s pretend.” You can pretend you are happy when in fact you are miserable. You can pretend you are not addicted when in fact you are. You can pretend that you are in total control over your own mind and body, but in fact, you are not.

You might not describe the powers that possess or control you by using the word “demon,” but you might still be in bondage to some power over which you have little or no control. I know people who are controlled by greed, and that can be destructive to themselves and to others. I know people who are totally controlled by the demon of hate. I know others who are controlled by the demon of lusting for power and prestige. And I know people who are controlled by the demon of addiction — to alcohol, to some other drug, to gambling, or to pornography. They are in bondage.

The fact is, you do not have to be a raving lunatic, running half-naked through the streets, to suffer inwardly. You can be a respectable member of the community. You can have a good job, a beautiful home; you can drive an expensive car and have money in the bank to spare. You can appear to have it all together. You can look very good on the outside, but inside you are suffering deeply.

In this story, Jesus meets this man who is dwelling among the tombs. The first response of the man is: “Don’t torment me.” In other words, “Leave me alone.” That seems like a strange reaction. You might have expected him to say, “Thank God you are here. Free me from these demons.”

But that expectation does not take seriously how we are all in bondage, how easily we adjust to our demons, and how painful it is to have them exorcized. Without having the demons on which to blame his bizarre behavior, he would have to be held responsible for his own actions. “Do not torment me.” This statement shows how difficult it is for any of us to change, even when the change is needed and is for the better. Not everyone who is ill wants to be healed.

What did Jesus do? He asked the voices, the demons in the man, to name themselves, and by doing so, he was saying, “I know who you are.” He was acting on the assumption that there is power in simply naming a demon. Demonic spirits are invincible until they are known and exposed.

There is power in “naming.” The very act of naming has a therapeutic effect, not only with demons but with any disorder or disease. In the act of naming or diagnosis, the patient’s anxiety is decreased by the knowledge that a respected and trusted therapist understands what is wrong. Only when we know what something is can we deal with it effectively.

It is sometimes called the “Rumpelstiltskin principle,” the term being taken from the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, which illustrates the magic of the right word — of naming. In the story, Rumpelstiltskin is the name of the evil man who wants to take the queen’s baby. The only way the baby can be saved is by the queen correctly naming the man. She finds the right name — Rumpelstiltskin — and the baby is saved, and everyone lives happily ever after.

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 them what they are suffering from knows how important the name is. It says to the patient that someone understands, that they are not alone with their sickness or problem, and now that we know what we’re dealing with, there is a way to get well.

The fact is that naming and identification are important in all parts of our living. You cannot solve a problem until you have named it, until you have specifically identified what the problem is.

Jesus healed the man. The demons were named and called out of him. Those who witnessed the event ran back to town to spread the news. Soon many people came out to see what had happened. But did they come with joy and celebration? No. They came with a mixture of curiosity and fear, and then they told Jesus to “get out.”

What were they afraid of? Why would they want such a good man to leave their area? Their fear is caused by their recognition of a power present that was greater than the power of evil spirits. If it is surprising that there was not unanimous joy at the arrival of a power greater than evil, a moment’s reflection will cause the surprise to subside.

Until Jesus arrived in their community, the people knew the locus of the evil, knew where the man lived, and devoted considerable time and expense trying to guard and control him. A community thus learns to live with demonic forces, isolating and partially controlling them. They see what they consider to be the location of evil spirits in this man, and as long as he is deranged, they are not forced to see what demonic spirits might be controlling them.

Now the power of God for good comes to their community, and it disturbs a way of life they had come to accept. Even when it is for good, power that neither can be calculated nor managed is frightening. What will God do next in our community? It’s always surprising to learn that the reign of God has its enemies. Those enemies reside not only over against us, but also within and among us, and no one is left untouched by the conflicts that follow. Being asked to leave by those you seek to help is a pain unlike any other. They saw in Jesus, and rightly so, a disturber and upsetter of their familiar ways. They saw him as an outside agitator. If he stayed around very long, no telling what might happen next. He might discover some other demons hidden in some of their closets.

Does that sound familiar? Have you heard people say, “If only those outsiders would stay away, all would be well. We can take care of the evil in our community in our own way. We don’t want any outside interference.”

Also, consider the reaction of the man who was healed. He wanted to leave his home area and go with Jesus. Of course! If he could go with Jesus, his life would be safe. He wouldn’t have to put up with those people who had previously isolated him and were afraid of him. He could avoid the problems at home and be a missionary to the world.

But Jesus would have none of it. He told the man, “Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.” If you stay in your own territory, you have the chance to do even more good.

It’s not enough to have your illness cured — you are to do more. You are to go beyond your ordinary church experience and put your newly found self to work. It’s not enough to be converted and revel in your new birth — go home to your neighbors and put your new life into service. Amen.