

**“Exorcism in America”**  
**Mark 5:1-20**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**Trinity Sunday**  
**June 7, 2020**

Unclean spirits and demons were a real problem in the 1st century. Though you could not see those dastardly demons, they had terrible, tangible effects. They took over a person’s identity, disconnecting them from their true self, defacing the goodness that is at the core of every human being. So powerful were these demons that they affected not only individuals but the entire community, ripping people apart, out of fear or ignorance, severing the bonds of human connection and affection - our original estate.

The man with the unclean spirit in the country of the Gerasenes is a case in point. So feared was he that some in the community had put him in chains. Imagine that. Imagine fearing someone so much that you lock them up, excommunicate them from society, leave them to fend for themselves at the margins of the neighborhood. Imagine fearing someone so much that you’d shackle them up, treat them as dead even when they’re still living, while you feast back at home with your family. It’s said that the man with the unclean spirit was so tormented by the demons that he bruised himself with stones, but I can’t figure out whether he harmed himself because of the unclean spirit, or because of the isolation that came with it.

Somehow he managed to break free of the chains, raising another curiosity for me. If the man with the unclean spirit was such a threat to the community, why, (when he breaks free), does he not bother anybody but himself? And if he doesn’t bother anybody, why had the community locked him up in the first place? It’s almost as if the community, fog-brained by its fear, had forgotten that the person with the unclean spirit needed *liberation from the demon, not exclusion from the community*. It’s almost as if the entire community had been overcome by this divisive demon, infecting the whole neighborhood, turning a group of people against one. Maybe that’s how these demons operated in the first century. Infecting different members of the community in different ways. Some punished by the sin of exclusion, the curse of self hate; others with the fear of one of their own - fear of their own brother, fear so deep they put him in chains.

Maybe you’re embarrassed by all this talk of spirits and demons. You hired pastors with seminary degrees so they could explain away this stuff. I’ve certainly been embarrassed by it. Christians like me - we’ve tended to explain it away as the stuff of pre-modern ignorance. Jesus was compassionate and merciful, we emphasize. He was just ignorant. Nothing to be ashamed of in the 1st century, what without all of our

knowledge and technology and advanced culture. He did what he could with the level of understanding that he had. Others have tried to update the 1st century diagnostics codes for demon possession to conform with the DSM of modern psychology. The man with the demon was driven mad by the hatred of his oppressors, one scholar notes. He retreated to his internal world where the external oppression that he experienced tormented his mind.<sup>1</sup> There's some truth in both points of view. I've seen persons with diagnosable mental illnesses treated with religious quackery. It didn't end well. It probably never does.

But a year and 400 after African men and women were brought to these lands in shackles by colonizers who enslaved them to extract their labor to build what would become a new nation, a nation whose great ideals - that all men are created equal - were marred from the beginning by the demonic truth that by "all men" - that meant white, land-holding men only; a truth reinforced again by the Dredd Scott Supreme Court decision that confirmed that, yes, at the founding of our country, the framers did not envision an America where Black people were considered citizens and therefore Black people had no right to expect equal treatment under the law; a week after more and more white people having joined their siblings of color in the streets, facing up to the reality of just how dangerous it can be to be Black in America, I think we are lying to ourselves about the pervasiveness of demonic forces that are alive and well in the land. And while we may not be able to see those demonic forces in any material way, their effects have material impact on individuals and communities alike - effects that can be seen, and measured, and felt in the bodies of human beings.

The Gerasene demoniac's demon had a name. It was "Legion," a term that had only one meaning in Mark's world: a division of Roman soldiers. Once you've paid attention to that important textual fact, then it becomes easy to see how the rest of the story is filled with military imagery. The term used for "herd" - a herd of swine - was used to refer to a band of military recruits. Pigs don't even travel in herds anyway. The phrase "he dismissed them" connotes a military command. And when the pigs charge into the lake, the word that is used suggests troops rushing into battle. Demonic forces exorcised by the God of Israel sent rushing to their deaths into the sea brings to mind the exodus story where Miriam sang with joy from the banks that the oppressor had been ended - horse and rider thrown into the sea. In other words, we have here a story where Jesus confronts Roman military power in what one scholar calls a symbolic repudiation of their campaigns of violence, disrupting the established systems of oppression that leave some enslaved and others afraid; disrupting those systems with a

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<sup>1</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 2002, pp. 190 - 194.

kind of healing that simultaneously offers an alternative way of living, a restoration of community, which is, itself, a threat to the power that be.<sup>2</sup>

I bet you've never thought of the church potluck as a threat to the powers that be. Anywhere people relate to each other across the divisions that have been prescribed for us. You know the divisions I'm talking about. Like the lady on my nextdoor app who I tried to give a free piece of furniture to this week. We set it all up. She wanted it for her child. And then I sent her my address and she said, "I'm so sorry, I can't come into that area of the city." That's what the demons do to ya. It's sad to see to not even free furniture, or free bread, or free wine, will get some people to cross those boundaries.

The Gerasene Demonian's demon was named "Legion." Our demons are named "racism," "anti-Blackness," "white privilege," "white supremacy." Like Legion, our demons affect different people in different ways. A Black person can be prejudiced against a white person like me, just like I can be prejudiced against a Black person. But a Black person cannot threaten to call the police on me for watching birds in a public park, cannot see me out jogging in the neighborhood and chase me down with guns, shoot me and call it self defense, cannot threaten me with state power for walking through her neighborhood or whistling at her. That's why these demons are so effective. They don't operate according to our illusions of meritocracy. We're not affected by these demons in the same way. I can live in a predominantly Black neighborhood and I'll always be safer than a Black person living in a predominantly white neighborhood. You can take a pastor who is the same age as me, the same educational level, the same in every way except for the hue of our skin, and they will always be more at risk when the police turn on the blue lights. Just look at Barack Obama. He is the elite of America - Harvard law school, more money than most of us, a white mother and a Black father. But in America, the man is Black. That's why he had to defend his faith, defend his citizenship status, defend his family. There are demons in our land.

This country is built on the backs of Black people who have never shared in the wealth created with their bodies. It's a fact. The typical white family today owns ten times the wealth owned by a typical Black family.<sup>3</sup> Where do we think all that wealth came from? Our country is still taking from Black people. We stole their land and their churches when we wanted to build hospitals downtown. We stole in again when we wanted to put a highway to nowhere right through the town. We stole their vote by locking them up in prison, wholesale disenfranchisement by a three strikes you're out law, stop and frisk, and drug laws heavily coded by race. And the only reason the wrongs haven't been made right is because too many white people have chosen to look

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<sup>2</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 2002, pp. 190 - 194.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/>

away. Chosen not to deal with it. Chosen to look away while our sisters and brothers suffered injustice and the social ills that stem from it. There are demons in our land.

“Black people have outlived their usefulness,” one person wrote 50 years ago. “Their *raison d’être* to this society has ceased to be a compelling issue. Once an economic asset they are now considered an economic drag.” Sounds like the way white people outside of Baltimore talk about our city, doesn’t it? “The wood is all hewn, the water all drawn, the cotton all picked, and the rails reach from coast to coast. The ditches are all dug, the dishes all put away, and only a few shoes remain to be shined.”<sup>4</sup> There are demons in the land infecting all of us.

But there’s good news here today. There is great news today. I know an exorcist. His name is Jesus and he wants us all to be free. He wants us all to be freed from the demons that bind us. And even modern people like you and me can learn how to become an exorcist. The first step in exorcising a demon, is to call it by its name. Name it when you see it. When a police officer holds a knee to a Black man’s neck while he’s crying out that he can’t breathe. A man brutally restrained because he was accused of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill? That’s racism. Call that demon by its name. When a President clears a park of peaceful protestors with tear gas and the military in violation of their constitutional rights so he can go and hold up a Bible that he does not read, that’s fascism and blasphemy - call it by its names. When Breonna Taylor, a 26-year old EMT who aspired to be a nurse and had no criminal record, was shot at least eight times during an erroneous “no-knock” drug search warrant and her family has to file a civil lawsuit before the police department tells the truth about what happened, that’s racism. Call it by its name.

When Jesus calls the demon by its name, he robs it of its power. And it is the one thing that too many white people in our country continually fail to do. Too many of us have let it slide. That’s what all these young people are doing in the streets. They are calling the demons by their names. They are pushing us all to look and see what some of us have been privileged to ignore. They are pushing back against injustice and breaking white silence which is the oxygen that racism breathes in this country. And in so doing they are inviting us to imagine a different future together. One where your zip code doesn’t determine your length of life, your skin color doesn’t determine whether you are safe with police, your income level doesn’t pre-determine your chances of success. Imagine a different future - where people don’t profit off prisons, but we all profit together from shared prosperity.

Not everyone can see that, not at first. Some people have to live in their fear a bit longer. Some people in the neighborhood where Jesus was exorcising, asked him to please leave. Even the man who was once chained, asked Jesus to “get me out of

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel F. Yate, *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America*. I first heard this quote from Dr. Brian Blount in a different sermon on exorcism.

here.” But Jesus says no, go back and tell people what God has done for you. And I don’t think Jesus would have told him that if he didn’t know that there would be people ready to embrace each other. I imagine there were some tables set, some feasts prepared, where people started to see the extent of their own ignorance, the pain they had caused some of their neighbors, and the joy that follows when God releases you from the grip of those demons, and you discover again your true identity, your true self, the goodness that is at the core of every human being. The bonds of human connection and affection that we can experience right now when we call those demons out and find ourselves - sisters and brothers - one family, one baptism, one table, one Lord - our original state.