
On the Brink of Healing

Luke 8:26-39

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 19, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

We are on the brink of healing but we can't seem to get there as a people or as a nation. It seems as if we're always on the brink like a broken record stuck on the same musical line. We continue to run endlessly on the treadmill of terror. We never quite reach the place of healing. We want healing, don't we? Or maybe we don't. Maybe we can tell what we really want and who we really are by our name.

There's something about a name, the meaning of a name, the way it rolls or doesn't roll off your lips. A name you cherish or one you've changed for various reasons. Your name. It means something. If it didn't, some people wouldn't decide to use their middle name instead of their first name or choose a new name altogether or keep their last name or use a hyphenated name when they get married. There's something about a name.

Cameron means 'crooked nose.' Kennedy means 'ugly head.' Brian (no offense to our beloved Brian Schmidt) means 'maggot.' Caleb means 'dog.' Portia means 'pig.' You gotta be careful with names.

Today we encounter some names, one name in particular you probably would never want to be called. Nobody prays for this one and the main protagonist in our story didn't either. We don't know how he got the name but we can surely see how this name shapes his life. And what a name it is—Legion.

When Legion is your name you might think your parents were stoned or drunk at a frat party at the time they named you or they were playing a bad April Fool's joke. He's stuck with this name like Krazy Glue—Legion is like a leech. This isn't a name that recruits followers. It wasn't his fault, your fault, that you were called this. It wasn't as if you prayed the rosary or wrote it down in your journal as a bucket list plea. It just happened one day. Your name was Legion, out of nowhere. And Legion refers to a Roman army of four to six thousand soldiers. That's one problem for every soldier. This is a big name with a big impact on this man. So devastating it shreds him to pieces, shredding every piece of cloth off his body. He's naked. He rents a residence among the tombs. He's tormented. Legion. A name, this six-letter name, means something.

Legion is not a nice name for anyone because it means he was driven by demons into the wilds of Tarheel territory. It means we are full of sickness, possessed by vast powers other than God. Tormented. And the irony is that we, or our sickness, love the name Legion, love the torment, love tombs as tents because a storm is the norm for us; it is our usual reality and we know nothing else, so we love it because we love what we know, even if it hurts us.

We can be so ill that when a healing opportunity stares at us face to face in Jesus we beg not to be tormented—"I beg you do not torment me!"—when in fact all we've known has been torment and trials and terror. Legion was on the brink of healing before his healer but the illness is that the torment brings comfort and safety when it may be killing us. We just don't recognize it. Ironically, when Legion is your name, calm and serenity are a threat when it should be a relief. Abuse makes you feel good. "I beg you do not torment me!" Some who are sick don't want to be healed.

And to go even further, when this man, possessed by demons, is clothed and in his right mind, it's at that point, when the people become afraid. The same thing happens when the disciples are on the boat in a storm—when Jesus brings calm, then they become afraid. What's wrong with us? It's true, even if we don't want to admit it, that some people love chaos, love trouble, love torment, always invoking problems into their lives. We can be on the brink of healing and not really want it. Legion knows no other way of life or being. This is especially true when one has been tortured one's whole life, or at least for a part of it, to such an extent that what's normal becomes normative. Healing doesn't even look like healing anymore. Life doesn't look like life anymore.

We see what is the result of having Legion as a name. Animal rights activist may get perturbed over this but we see the trajectory of a legion-filled life. What happens to the swine when the demons enter them is the end result of a tormented life. "The herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned." This is the end when spirits other than God possesses one. This is the end when one's name is Legion. Living and dying among tombs, keeping funeral homes in business.

So what is your name today? I don't mean your given birth name or baptismal name. The man who lived among the tombs was up front about his name and his predicament. It was Legion. But what is your name?

People are not always that straightforward about their identity. But I'm reminded of a Maya Angelou saying—"When people show you who they are, believe them." We can discern some people's names by their actions. "Hi, my name is Joy." But why are you always so negative? "My name is peace." So why are you always stirring up conflict? Jesus doesn't actually ask other people in this story for their name, only the possessed man. But we can read others' reactions as the script of their lives therefore their lives tell us what are their names. When the 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." This man whom they knew as the crazy Gerasene or 'crazy Gery' in their neighborhood. This man who ran wild, naked and breaking chains, was now healed. But unlike a later story of a lost son, these people don't celebrate or cook a fatted calf. No parties for this one who has indeed returned to himself. Rather, they ask Jesus to leave them "for they were seized with great fear." What is their name? These people reveal that their name is "Fear" and it shapes their whole life.

On the brink of healing, they are afraid of healing and the healer. They ask Jesus, the healer, to leave them. The one they actually need, they want to get rid of. Perhaps the demon-possessed man wasn't the only one sick in this story because they are sick too, so sick they fear wholeness and calm, so sick they fear a resolution to gun violence. They fear change because the healing of this man who is now clothed and in his right mind would be an alteration in how they treat him and relate to him. They don't see his healing as a benefit for them.

Healing affects everyone, all of our relationships, not just the one healed. That's why some prefer slopping it up with swine rather than seeing their fellow human being saved. That's why it's so easy to keep things the way they are—to say nothing about gun violence or to remain silent about hatred toward those who are different in anyway. It's so easy to do so when we aren't the ones naked or running wild among the tombs, when we aren't the ones ostracized in society or the ones whose sanctuaries have been desacralized.

The truth is that some of us don't want to be healed nor do we want others to be healed because it will change how we have to relate to others and ourselves. Healing will change our reality and the

bottom line is that many don't like change even if it's the best thing for everyone. We like the way things are and the way things have always been done and we never question it.

A little girl noticed that every time her mother cooked a roast she chopped a piece off the end of the roast before putting it in the oven. She asked her mom why she did this. "Well to be honest, I do it because that's the way my mother always does it...I'm sure she must have some good reason for it." At the next family gathering, the child decided to satisfy her curiosity. "Grandma, why do you always chop the end off the roast before cooking it?" "Well to be honest, I do it because that's the way my mother always does it...I'm sure she must have some good reason for it." A week or so later the little girl was visiting her 90 year old great grandmother. She explained that her mother and grandmother always chop the end off the roast before cooking it, but couldn't remember why. Did she know? Great grandma replied, "Imagine the two of them doing that! I only cut the piece off because my pan was too small!" We like what we've only and always known and nothing more, even when it comes to the possibility of healing, even if it means someone remains sick.

Fear can set in on the brink of healing because in these Gerasene situations, we only know how to talk to Legion. We don't know how to talk with someone whose name is 'healer' or 'healed.' So when Legion is gone we may feel that we've lost our best friend or the life we've always known. Therefore, the breakthrough for another person, the freedom for another the person, the healing and restoration of another, might be experienced as a loss for us, though it's a gain for that person. No wonder we ask Jesus to leave—we don't want anything to change because we know when Jesus is present everything has to change.

This is what happens when your name is "Fear" on the brink of healing and if this is the sad truth, then we may not always have each other's best interests in mind because we can receive a healing as a loss, a seismic unwanted change, so what do we do? We fear the unknown altered healed future, not thinking of what is best for those who've been naked, tormented all their lives and tenting among the tombs. We can't trust each other for our healing, especially not when you're dealing with names like 'Legion' or 'Fear.' We may actually like those names because it's normal. 'Mass shooting in Orlando' is normal. 'Killing people at Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME church in Charleston' is normal. 'Massacre of the Innocents at Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, CT' is normal.

The status quo of violence against and hatred of the other is deceptively, comfortably normal. How it's always been is too easy and can be used as a way to keep Jesus out of the way. The Legion of xenophobia and the legion of gun violence are too lovable for many, more adored than fellow human beings, which is why we tell Jesus to take a hike. We ask him to leave our lives, our county, our country, even when we witness a demon-possessed man becoming a disciple, even when we see tortured life transformed. There's no rejoicing in this healing. We fear it. That's the real sickness—apathetic social status quo under the veneer of a so-called Christianity. It's sick when tombs are a hot sale in the human home market and we are fine with it. That means we are more satisfied with torture than healing.

We may not want Jesus around because we not only fear what healing means for our lives but also fear that he may ask us the same question he posed to Legion—"What is your name?"—and we fear what our answer may be. We don't want to hear the truth or face the truth of our own reality.

If I were to ask you what your name is today, what would it be? Legion? Fear? Anger? Frustration? Lonely? Depression? Lost? Confused? Stating your name, naming your struggle or problem, naming what you are full of (and some of you are full of it), is a step toward your healing, a step toward your

freedom, a move toward being clothed in your right mind. So claim your name today just like Legion did. He had to name his torment to open the gateway to healing. Name it because if you don't, you won't be set free from your inhumanity. Name it because if you never name it, it will never be cast out. Like at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, someone will stand and say, "My name is... And I'm an alcoholic." They name their struggle as part of the healing process.

I realize that you may still be trying to figure out your real name, not what others call you nor what you pretend to be. You may not know your name right now, but you do know that you are tormented and in need of healing and our ministers will be ready to pray with you and anoint you with oil after the service.

Regardless of what your name might be, it's critical to turn to the One whose name is above every name. It's key to turn to Jesus on the brink of healing and not tell him to go away; that would be horrible timing. His name at which every knee will bow and every tongue confess is the name we need to call. Jesus, there's something about that name. His name is mentioned more than Legion because his name is more powerful than any other name. His name is the source of healing not only in this story but also in the ones that follow as he heals two women—Jairus' daughter and a woman hemorrhaging blood. Built into his very name is what he does. Names mean something. When he is born, we hear that his name will be called Jesus for he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). He will save. He will heal. Jesus, the sweetest name on earth. Jesus, lover of my soul. Jesus, healer of the nations. "All Hail the power of Jesus' name let angels prostrate fall bring forth the royal diadem and crown him lord of all." He may be asking you what is your name and knowing your name is critical but he wants to be sure that you know his name.

A life shaped by his name means that your wounds will become a source of healing. You will have scars but that just means you've been healed. If you don't have scars, you're either not human, never been hurt, or you're not healed.

The real sign of being healed is not even knowing your name or his name. The real sign of being healed is going away and acting on that healing and sharing it with others. It's never just to sit with Jesus as Jesus sends the healed man away from him to preach. We must act on our healing and we surely need healing agents of God, now.

We are on the brink of healing—and many are right that praying isn't enough—it's time to act. In Jesus' name. Amen.