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Subversive Questions: The Upside-Down Way of Jesus

What is Your Name?

Luke 8:26–39

The extreme temps this weekend tell us that Summer is convincingly here. Soon enough, in July, we'll be moving to the air-conditioned Fireplace Room to worship. And all God's people say "Amen!" With the Summer comes the end of Eastertide. I want to offer a little context for where we are in the liturgical calendar: We are now in what is called "Ordinary time", from the word "ordinal" which means counted. Each week is simply given a number—Today is the second Sunday after Pentecost. Ordinary time makes up about half of the Christian calendar year.

In the New Testament texts, we shift focus from where we've been, reflecting on the last week of Jesus's earthly ministry and life to the fascinating stories and parables he told along the way concerning the nature of the kingdom of God. If today's pericope is any indication, these stories are far from ordinary and venture out into extraordinary territory.

Today begins a span of Summer weeks in the gospel of Luke. This will be the text for a new sermon series I have titled: "Subversive Questions: Learning to Live in the Upside-Down World of Jesus."

In Jesus's encounters with others, he often asked questions. This form of critique is how he challenged the accepted norms of society. It was his way of *being* subversive and provocative. When religion was bent on presenting God to others in the form of an exclamation point, Jesus bent *it* into a question mark. Jesus also used questions to get to the heart of a person. People long to be seen, heard and valued. Questions open up a two-way communication that enlists both

parties to invest at least some part of themselves in the exchange. Questions are an invitation. So we're going to look at a series of subversive questions Jesus asked that call *us* to consider what it means to live in Jesus' upside-down world.

A probing question is at the heart of today's passage. Understandably so, most preachers likely avoid preaching on this story of the Gerasene Demoniac. Many find it hard to relate to for our modern context. We get lost in the unbelievability of exorcisms or find it hard to believe that miracles such as this one still happen today? This is enough to keep preachers away. But I am less concerned with whether or not this really happened as a historical event. As you could imagine, the opinions vary on this. There's a saying that goes: All stories are true; Some actually happened. We miss the forest for the trees if we make this passage about some assent to the unbelievable or impossible. So hopefully this sets you in a more receptive posture for what I think is a valuable lesson Jesus wants us to hear.

When Jesus steps off the boat onto shore, in the country of the Gerasenes, he is immediately met by a man *we are told* is demon-possessed. It says, he has taken his disciples "opposite Galilee"—that region where Jesus is from, a place of familiarity. They made the long trek—some 8-12 miles—to a land that is unknown... to the "other side" of the lake... of the tracks... of the border wall... of the aisle... of comfort and control. And after sailing through a massive storm the night before, they arrive in Gentile territory. And no sooner than they exit the boat does a man meet them, yelling at Jesus, with a question of his own: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

This man had no possessions but the demonic forces which possessed *him*—no clothes, no community (having been shunned and shackled outside the town), no home (now living among the dead in the tombs). This man is hardly human, at least in the eyes of his own people. This loud outburst is actually the violent questioning of the demons themselves. They had thrown him to the ground and caused

him to beg Jesus to stop tormenting them. Something I never noticed here before, but the text says that Jesus had cast them out but it appears nothing happens. It only seems to exacerbate the tormenting.

This man's liberation begins only when Jesus asks a question of his own in return—this time directed to the *person*, not the demons. "What is your name?" It is a re-humanizing question, one the man doesn't even begin to know how to answer anymore. He responds not with a name but with his condition, "Legion", which was a military term for a large platoon of Roman soldiers. For a human that had been so-reduced to being *barely* human, it's as if the man was saying, "I don't know *who* I am anymore. I am what my community says I am... all my diagnoses... a summation of all my anxieties and fears. There's just so many, they seem endless. I am legion."

We don't know the causes of this man's afflictions but there's no doubt his life was out of his control. The influences that were pressing in on him were immense and coming from all sides.

The idea that any one of our lives is in our control is often put to challenge by our everyday realities: Job concerns and quotas, financial pressures, relationships to navigate, socio-political pressures... These are just the strains and stresses of what it means to maintain the status quo. For those that live lives which challenge—or queer—the systems of what is called "normal", they experience added pressures in a society which tries to keep them on the margins... out among the tombs... fighting for any measure of care and provision... with far less air time... or altogether demonized.

The struggle—we have to remember—is never personal, it's systemic. We could say it's spiritual. Paul puts it this way in the book of Ephesians: "We're not waging war against enemies of flesh and blood alone. No, this fight is against tyrants, against authorities, against supernatural powers and demon princes that slither in the darkness of this world, and against wicked spiritual armies that lurk about in heavenly places." I love the vivid language here in *The Voice*

translation. Even for those of us who claim to live lives of faith: We strive to follow Jesus but often default to the familiar. We too fall prey to the routines and whims of worldly systems. We *all* are, in this way, possessed by that which wages war on us daily.

Jesus asks, “What is your name?” This question is subversive because the way of the world is just to continue throwing diagnoses at someone... more labels... perhaps incarceration... relegating these to just another casualty of the system. The name may not have always been “legion” but it gets there eventually. With this question, Jesus wants to speak to the person, not the statistic. To speak someone’s name is to dignify them. You almost always have to look them in the eye when you ask for someone’s name. We have to know the power of being named.

This week, we celebrated Juneteenth—a holiday to recognize the abolition of slavery in this country: A delayed recognition when it first came... and a temporary placeholder now for a delayed liberation which is still yet to be fully realized. Many of us may not share an ethnic heritage with those oppressed by slavery, but we do share a heritage of another sort as siblings of the human race. Their struggle for freedom is our collective struggle. For, none are free until we all are free.

This recognition calls to mind a people without a name. For the over 400,000 Africans brought directly to America against their will, of all the things that were stripped away, so too were their names. Many slaves took on the names of their enslavers. Some of them were given biblical names (like Adam, Eve, Cain, and Miriam). Some of them were given classical names from Greek and Roman history (like Caesar, Cato, Pompey, Venus, Diana). To be sure, this was a move of dominance and possession. You see, to name is to possess.

Jamaica Kincaid is an Antiguan-American novelist and gardener. She teaches at Harvard University in the African and African-American Studies department. In her book, *My Garden*, she writes about the evils of European conquest in terms of gardening. That European

nations, when setting out to conquer new territories, would encounter new plants, and of course new people, and because, to them, they had no prior history or names, they took the liberties to give them new names, so that these could become their possession.

Kincaid writes: "This naming of things is so crucial to possession—a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away—that it is a murder, an erasing, and it is not surprising that when people have felt themselves prey to...conquest, among their first acts of liberation is to change their names (Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka)." Retrieving a name is an act of dignity, of restoring agency.

Having a name represents a web of choices; and with choice, comes power. Who gets to do the naming? Why has this name been chosen? What does the name mean? How will this name be used? Carl Jung, the Swiss Psychologist, said: "The world will ask who you are, and if you do not know, the world will tell you." I try to be mindful of how important it is for queer and trans folks to change their names or pronouns. This is a way of taking back control of their identity which was handed to them by others.

Jesus asked the man, "What is your name?" A life is much more than a name, but being known by name is powerful.

Father Gregory Boyle, in his book *Tattoos on the Heart*, writes about his experiences as the head of Homeboy Ministries in LA. What was originally meant to be a peace-making ministry to try and stop gang violence turned into a business of employing former and current gang members who would not be given a job otherwise. They wear t-shirts now which say: "The best way to stop a bullet is a job."

A couple of years ago, I read his memoir which is highly recommended. In it, Father Boyle shares how he would often would walk the neighborhoods to try and develop relationships with these. He tells of one particular boy known by the name Cricket, a 15-year-old gang member. Cricket was *especially* cold to him and would always turn the other direction anytime he came around.

Father Boyle did a little digging and discovered Cricket's real name is William. So one day when he walks up to a group, he starts shaking hands with each of them and notices that Cricket doesn't disappear. He stays. When he gets to him, he shakes his hand, looking him in the eyes, and says, "William, how ya doing? It's good to see ya." Cricket remains silent but shakes his hand back. Father Boyle, who never liked to overstay his welcome, turns to walk away when he hears William say in his young, breathy voice: "Hey, the priest knows my name!" Boyle writes, "Who doesn't want to be called by name, known?"

With four simple words, Jesus was casting out the demons of isolation, of shame and betrayal, of exclusion... This was a way to say: "I see you, I'm with you." From Isaiah chapter 43: "The Lord who created you says, I have called you by name, you are mine." To name is to possess.

Some of us may need to be reminded that we are named and known by a loving Creator that wants to set us free from our own possessions. Some of us need to be reminded today of the ways we may be part of someone else's oppression and chains... in the ways we label and dismiss others. How vulnerable it is to know someone's name. We'd rather know their labels so we can easily group them in and keep our distance. That requires less of us.

This Gerasene's story ends in liberation. The text sets the image of him fully clothed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, and in his right mind. He was on the way to being fully restored. Following this, the man begs to follow Jesus, but Jesus denies him. Instead, he asks him to go back to his town. You see, knowing who you are is always a return home. We're all trying to return to home. When we help others return to their home, we also return home. We touch something fundamental in this act of humanizing each other.

Jesus knew that the one demonized by the village can also be the healing the village itself needed. Now, that isn't always the case. Sometimes the cast-out needs to move on and find a new home.

Where are you in this story? Some days, I feel like Jesus working to heal the wounded around me, casting out the demons that keep people bound. Then other days, I'm on the other side, wondering about those worldly forces which are naming me and possessing me. Some days, I'm crossing lakes into unknown places and stepping out in boldness. Other days, I never even get on the boat back in Galilee.

We don't have to go very far to venture out into the unknown and uncomfortable spaces in our lives. This may not be geographical but more emotional. Wherever we are, whatever our unknowns, Jesus shows up how a starting place could be with questions, with curiosity, to become familiar with the unfamiliar. Let us hear what the Spirit is speaking. Amen.