

Sunday, June 23, 2013  
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost  
The Rev. Deacon Pete Cornell

1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a  
Psalm 42 and 43  
Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 8:26-39

As I prepare for my preaching, I always read before and after the selected propers for the day. Scripture was intended to be a story, and as such, context is important. Much like picking up a novel and trying to form an opinion based on a single page or random selection, I can easily miss the bigger story. Today, I read you the story about Jesus' travel across the sea of Galilee, driven by a storm and his healing encounter with a member of the Gerasenes. Last week we heard how Jesus delivered a repentant woman from her sins at the home of the Pharisee, Simon. That was a woman who was from the Jewish community in Galilee, who was of dubious character. But a devout Jewish person hearing the story in that day would be able to label her based on her behavior, and understand just how much Jesus was forgiving. Now we have Jesus in the Gentile country of the Gerasenes, where the laws and the customs would not be well understood by the largely Jewish audiences being addressed by Jesus. But demonic possession, that is a condition that anyone could understand. The author goes on to describe aspects of his illness, which would have made him virtually untouchable by a devout Jew. He was a Gentile, naked, lived among the dead and in proximity to swine, was given to episodes of violent behavior that even chains could not constrain, and would not know God in any helpful way. Whether his isolation was self-imposed or the result of his erratic behavior, he was an outcast, and no person was able to help him. But the man, coming face to face with the Son of God, recognized that he was no longer in control of the situation. And the demons were clearly afraid, begging Jesus not to further their torment. In many cultures, a person cannot interact intimately with an anonymous person. Jesus asks the man his name, and the demons answer 'legion'. A legion was a unit of the Roman army, generally of about 6000 men. The implication was that the man was possessed by six thousand individual demons, too many to name. And they were afraid that Jesus would cast them out of the man and force them back into the endless torment of the abyss. So they begged him to allow them to enter into the herd of swine on the hill. Once they inhabited the herd, they rushed into the sea and were destroyed. And for those who would be offended over the sacrifice of innocent animals, please remember that in the context of the time, pigs were unclean to the Jewish people, and favored for sacrifices by the Romans. The symbolism of useless animals associated with Roman oppression would not be lost on the listeners of the time, our more enlightened understanding of our stewardship for all creatures of the earth notwithstanding. The conclusion of the man's journey to salvation has him being commissioned by Jesus to return to his family and to spread the good news among the Gentiles. To bring the story forward to modern day, the story would likely be about

someone who suffers from a mental illness or an addiction. I personally know the heart break of a child lost to addiction. My own journey with someone with mental illness and in learning from others, the most common emotion for those close to the individual is fear. Fear in the moment that we cannot understand how they are processing the world around them. Fear that we have no basis for how to react. Fear that our own limitations and bias will in some way make the situation worse. Fear that our loved one will be lost to us into a world filled with demons that we are powerless to vanquish. For the Gerasenes, the fear became focused on Jesus after the man was healed. The people in the community surely must have been afraid of the man during his violent outbursts, enough that they would try to restrain him with chains. But they could avoid him until he fled to the wilderness. No need to face him, if he appeared in public, they could always avoid him. Society reacts to abhorrent acts by excluding the individual, and shunning was the accepted response to the man. But now he is cured, the demons are gone and the individual appears ready to live according to the societal norms. The people will have to interact with him, deal with him in the community, accept him as a citizen, perhaps even learn something from him about what being saved means. Jesus showed them that he was no different now than they were. But perhaps the real fear is Jesus showed them how little different they were from this man. A very powerful and visible transformation within the community. Later in chapter 10, Luke will report on Jesus commissioning the seventy to go forth in his name. And they will return, astonished they too have the power to cast out demons and heal in His name. I wonder what it must be like for someone to have actually witnessed a dramatic healing by the call of God's power on Earth. If I were ever a witness to such an act of cure, I expect I would be afraid. Afraid that the power of God would come that close to me, and I would not know how to act, that my limitations and imperfect faith would somehow interfere with the power of God. I know how flawed a Christian I am. How often have we let our fear of the different-ness of others affect how Christian we are in dealing with others? How often has our fear of changing ourselves stopped us from being called into community with others? Does our fear focus so narrowly on how closely others mirror our own views that we risk our vow of caring for all God's people? The Gerasene was a man who did not share the heritage of Jewish faith, had no exposure to the Good News, had no friends, and was pushed aside by society. And in the end, the man became a witness for Christ to the Gentiles and carried the message of hope to all who would hear. This story shows just how far we can go, from a violent outcast to a witness for Christ. Remember that he was a stranger, who Jesus compassionately healed out of love. The demons we carry are more afraid of the power of Jesus that we ever should be. We must not be afraid of who we will become through the transformative power Christ acting through us. We are already saved by Christ and marked as one of His own forever. He knows us and He knows our demons, and if we can overcome our fear, we can proclaim His healing presence in our own community.