

Luke 8:26-39

Proper 7 - 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

June 24, 2001

As far as I was concerned, it was better when Aunt Helen was locked up.

I remember the night when she was not. I can still see her sitting on the turquoise couch. Agitated, angry. She had returned home to my grandparent's house a short time before. She had been in a mental hospital in Toledo – the nut house we kids called it. But that night she was there when we made our visit at Grandma and Grandpa Schlessman's. Because of her mental problems her driver's license had been revoked. That night she was blaming my mom for it all. I remember her shouting, my mother's explaining she had nothing to do with it, more accusing, more shouting, my mother's tears.

They came and got Aunt Helen a short time after that. I was relieved. Better when she was locked up.

Now I never quite felt that way about Uncle Alfred. He is my mother's brother. There was a lot of shame in the family about him. He talks about farming in outer space these days – back when I was young Jesus told him to give money to a young girl at church and they took him away to Tiffin – to the State Mental Hospital. I suspect that there may have been more to the story than that but that is what I was told back then. But even then I knew that the world was a simpler place when he was in Tiffin and Aunt Helen in Toledo.

Just as the world was a simpler place for those villagers in our gospel for today when the man with the demons was naked and hiding out among the tombs. He'd been that way for some time – they'd grown accustomed. But when they heard about Jesus and the swine rushing into the sea they 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.

In a storybook we might read this sort of dialogue – Joe – you're okay. Wait til we tell your sisters and brothers and mother. How relieved they will be. You're back. You've been gone so long. What was it like for you to be possessed by those demons? Were you afraid? Lonely? Did you know what was happening to you?

But instead when they saw the man sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind they were afraid.

The way I would have been afraid to have seen Aunt Helen released again before she died. Or the way my mother's family is a little afraid to have Uncle Alfred on his own.

They were afraid and they asked Jesus to leave.

As Luke tells this it is not a story about people's fear but about Jesus power. The demons in the story know that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God. The demons know Jesus' power – they beg him not to send them into the abyss – oblivion. But Jesus plays a little joke on them sending the demons into the unclean swine and the swine rush into the sea and swine and demons are no more. And the man who had no life at all is at peace – clothed – at Jesus' feet.

Does Jesus have that kind of power – even now? Every time sickness strikes, you and I pray, trusting that Jesus does. And so many times the testimony I hear is that Jesus has lifted another one from among the tombs and restored life.

For ourselves and for our children we trust that Jesus has great power.

But what about for those who are cast out? Whole neighborhoods of people live on the edge of poverty, on the edge of violence, on the edge of chaos. Most of the time my concern for them is about like the townsfolk felt about that man who lived among the tombs.

Families struggle when a member of the family is mentally ill.

Or when a father or mother is victimized by Alzheimer's disease.

Parents carry a great burden when their child has cerebral palsy.

A great part of Jesus' power in these people's lives is you and I – for we are Christ's own body. Are we afraid? Do we send Jesus away? Or do we invite Jesus into these struggles, accompany him there?

I know what Jesus wants. Jesus wants every single one of his children to be clothed, of sound mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus. In every family, in every neighborhood, in every nation Jesus wants his children to be healthy and whole and at peace. But often I am afraid.

I am afraid the task is too big – there are too many to bring to Jesus – their problems are too great. I feel overwhelmed. I do nothing.

I am afraid of what may happen to me. Maybe the town's folk were afraid in that way. What if this man is only temporarily cured? What if suddenly he is violent again? Better he should remain among the tombs.

But Jesus is not afraid, not even of death if it should come to that. For he is determined to gather all the children of God at his feet.

Will you join him in his work of gathering? Or will you be afraid? Will you believe in his power or in the power of the demons? I know what Jesus wants for you and for me. Let us pray that Jesus gets his way.