

*You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.*

God bless that poor guy in the Gospel story we just read.

As wild as that story is, deep down, I suspect that some of us may be able to relate to him more than we like to admit. Maybe he has a mental or chronic illness, both very common. Maybe he suffers from an addiction, also very common. Maybe he's traumatized by something in his past (again, sadly, common). But whatever it is that's possessed this man, it's come to define him to the community and, worse yet, himself. For when Jesus asks him, "What is your name?" he doesn't say Tom, Dick or Harry, but only the vastness of what ails him: "*Legion.*"

He said his name was "Legion".

We know that names are important. Some of us go by nicknames or prefer our middle names. Looking over the list of graduates in the bulletin, I bet we could get their parents to tell us the story of how and why that particular name was chosen.

Names are important in Scripture too. Transformed by God, Abram becomes Abraham, and Sarai, Sarah. Their grandson Jacob wrestles with God and becomes Israel. And, skipping ahead a couple of millennia, you'll notice that our sign out front doesn't read St. Saul's but . . . St. Paul's.

But the name given by the man in today's gospel is really no name at all. Legion – a multitude generally speaking, but in that context a reference to an occupying force of about 6,000 Roman soldiers. The man literally felt occupied by a foreign power.

Besides all those demons,  
he's from the wrong side of the "tracks",  
the wrong side of the Sea of Galilee.  
He's Gerasene, thus Gentile (not Jewish like Jesus).  
His own people reject him, keeping him chained.  
He's vulnerable to the point of nakedness.  
He lives in a tomb, the living dead.

He is the ultimate outcast.  
I know our motto there on the bulletin says,  
"In this church there will be no outcasts" but honestly,  
how would you react if someone like this walked in?

Yet Jesus goes out of his way to meet this fellow.  
Jesus crosses the Galilee to heal him,  
and then leaves as quickly as he arrived.

I often tell this story to families during our Baptism Workshop. It comes up when discussing the part of the baptismal liturgy called the denunciations and affirmations – when the parents and godparents denounce all the forces of wickedness that draw us from the love of God, and then affirm turning toward Jesus Christ. I point out that we can't do one without the other because nature really does abhor a vacuum.

It's like all those demons so palpable in the gospel story.

Once they leave the man, they still have to go someplace.  
So they run into the pigs (ritually unclean) and plunge off the cliff,  
freeing up the man to be filled with Jesus.

But this story speaks as vividly to the later Christening (or naming)  
part of the service  
when the candidate is baptized in the name of God,  
then anointed with holy oil in the shape of a cross,  
symbolic of sharing in Christ's death to resurrection.  
This bestows a new name, a new identity: Christ's own, forever.

Funny, we never do learn that man's name.  
All we know is that after meeting Jesus he is finally dressed and  
"in his right mind."  
He wants to go with Jesus.  
But we each have our own callings;  
his was to *follow Jesus by staying home* to declare what God had done for him.

This was his new identity.  
The folks back home might like it or not,  
they might even be scared of him in a new way.  
But he knew who he was:  
No longer "Legion" but single-minded as Christ's own, forever.  
Beloved of God.  
Blessed, that he might be a blessing to others.

That's who we are too.  
Let nothing else define us.  
Not our fears or failures, or our triumphs either.  
Not even our families, and certainly not our positions or possessions.

We are not what ails us.  
We are not the hurtful things we've been called

or the negative self-images  
that have haunted some of us since childhood.

So today as we honor our grads,  
here's something I want them to hear loud and clear.  
Here's what I most want them to know as they go on to their next adventures,  
(but it won't hurt the rest of us to listen in either):  
You are Christ's own, now and forever.  
You are Beloved of God.  
You are blessed – just for the sheer joy of it,  
and that you'll go be a blessing to others.

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