

Confronting Evil
Bruton Parish Church
June 20, 2010
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Charles A. Robinson

In the name of and for the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.†

This is quite a story – isn't it? A real goblin story. An itinerant teacher in confrontation with supernatural beings possessing a man who wanders the tombs and the countryside, unclothed, shackled from time to time by his fellow country folk, but never able to be restrained for very long. There is an image of the underworld bottomless pit to which the beings beg not to be returned,¹ and finally, a lake full of drowned pigs. On its face, this could be the stuff of a series of low-budget, Roman-numeraled movies, shown in trilogy on Halloween. A common reaction to this story in preaching is to attribute the man's symptoms to serious mental illness and to find comfort in his healing by Jesus in the face of the townspeople who had rejected the man. There is nothing wrong with this interpretation as far as it goes. However, in choosing to see this person only in the light of mental illness is to miss an opportunity to see in this story a real life lesson for living the Gospel in our own lives.

I submit that we gain very little for our lives from this story, if we try to focus only upon the detailed events or upon the characters and try to look back upon them from our context and figure them out.

The writer of the Gospel intends to communicate that Jesus experienced a confrontation with evil and that he prevailed. The word deliberately chosen by the writer means an evil spirit.² Of course, we know that ancient peoples attributed all sorts of maladies, physical and mental, to the presence of evil spirits and our modern society has found much more specific causes and sophisticated treatments for these afflictions. But one thing we have not found a specific and treatable cause for is the presence and the influence of evil. We know that it exists and we ask why. We even wonder why it exists if God is a caring and loving God. Here in this story, Jesus confronts evil and overcomes it. The details of the story are

¹ ἄβυσσον noun accusative feminine singular common from ἄβυσσος

[Fri] ἄβυσσος, ου, ἡ literally *bottomless pit*, transliterated into English as *abyss*; (1) as the place where dead people go *depths, underworld* ([RO 10.7](#)); (2) as a place for shutting away the devil and evil spirits *abyss, bottomless pit, very deep and large hole* ([LU 8.31](#); [RV 20.3](#))
ἄβυσσον N-AF-S ἄβυσσος

² δαιμόνια noun accusative neuter plural common from δαίμωνιον

[Fri] δαίμωνιον, ου, τό (1) *heathen god, minor divinity* ([AC 17.18](#)); (2) predominately *demon, evil spirit*, regarded as a supernatural and independent being neither human nor divine ([MT 7.22](#))

not important – the pigs and the drowned supernatural beings. They are truly representations for their time. What matters is the confrontation of evil by Jesus and its example for us.

Where are modern humans in this story? Can we be found in the man filled with demons? Are we the townspeople who wish to chain and shackle the evil amongst us so that we need not confront it and when we are shown the path to be true deliverers become fearful of what will be required of us. We modern humans are truly found in both.

We do not like to confront evil. We do sometimes imagine that we confront evil with violent destruction and that if we just destroy enough evil that we will prevail. All of human history demonstrates that we will never confront and overcome evil by destruction. One of the things that keep us from confronting evil is our mystification of it. If we imagine that evil resides in some invisible being or beings in a transcendent netherworld somewhere, then that gives us a pass for direct accountability and confrontation. If we can believe we are hapless pawns who will never overcome evil because it is bigger than we are, then we can be lulled into complacent inaction.

An honest look at the evil that occurs in the world will show us that the evil acts have a human source. The Satan that we renounce in our covenant with one another is not some dark counter-being to God. When we renounce evil, we must face that the vow taken requires more of us than to say that we do not like bad people and that we will try to make sure we are not. The confrontation that Jesus has here with the demons of this man is based upon love and liberation. He faces down not just the demons but also the townspeople who simply abided this presence without taking any real action to resolve it. Not chains and shackles, but love and liberation. The people who had abided the evil amongst them actually became afraid when it was sent from their midst and then they asked Jesus to leave.

Evil is present in the acts that humans and their institutions commit and evil is present in the acts that humans and their institutions allow to be committed.

Mollie named this in her sermon last week, when she spoke of the unbridled greed that leads individuals, businesses, and governments to “wreak havoc” upon human life and environmental resources with “callous disregard.” She told us that we lose the generosity of God, when in our comfort, we allow these things to be, actively or passively.³

Most of you know that I have just returned from vacation. During our vacation, Terry and I attended our 40th high school reunion. Outside of the fact that I am not clear why all of our classmates chose to send their grandparents to the reunion instead of coming themselves, we had a wonderful time. Most of our classmates are mostly retired from their main life endeavors and occupations. They seem generally contented and we enjoyed seeing how their lives had progressed. I was pleased that at this point in our lives there is no bravado, posturing, or competition – only genuine reflection and reminiscing.

³ Turner, Mollie Douglas, The Reverend. *Prophetic Connections*. Sermon delivered at Bruton Parish Church on The Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 13, 2010.

One of our former classmates is engaged in work that I feel compelled to share with you and will likely be offering more information about as my ministry progresses here. Doctor Kevin Bales is the President and Co-founder of “Free the Slaves,” an organization that is confronting the evil of slavery that exists in our world, not in history, but today. I have learned within the last two weeks that there are “27 million slaves in the world today” and that “14,500 are trafficked into the United States each year.” “These slaves work in fields, brothels, homes, mines, restaurants – anywhere slave owners can feed their greed;”⁴ The kind of unbridled greed that Mollie spoke to us of last week. I have also learned that “Free the Slaves” has developed a 25-year plan to eliminate this slavery - involving governments, businesses, international organizations, consumers, and individuals. Kevin has written two books detailing this vision. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has stated that Kevin has developed “well-thought-out strategies for what to do to combat this scourge.” He further states, “None of us is allowed the luxury of imagined impotence. We can do something about it.”⁵ Dr. Bales’ work is but one example of how we can and must confront evil in its face as liberators.

If we, like the Gerasenes, make mere gestures of chains and shackles to contain evil and do not accept our role as agents of love and liberation, we will be consumed by that same evil. Jesus is calling humanity of every time and place to confront evil with love as liberators. That is an activist call. Acting against evil can be fearful, even when we see others confronting it and overcoming it.

Paul declares, “...for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3: 26-28).

Blessed be the name of God. †

⁴ www.freetheslaves.net Top 10 Facts About Modern Slavery.

⁵ www.freetheslaves.net