

Gerasene Jokes

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Lk 8:26-39

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You all are too polite!

Like good Lutherans you read scriptures all sober and somber!
Don't you know the Bible is funny!

First-century Christians would have been rolling in the aisles at this story,
holding their sides,
laughing uproariously,
hooting and crying!

The story of the "Gerasene demoniac" was tremendously *funny* for early Christians.

There are no less than four "jokes" in the story.

One of our problems seeing the humor is that humor is very cultural-specific.

What people in one culture see as outrageously funny,
people in other cultures won't "get."

So, I explain the jokes to you in this culture, these many years distant.

Jesus goes on a trip to another country.

"The country of the Gerasenes" is *Gentile* territory,
a land that is not Jewish (or Christian),
a people who do not know or worship the God of the Old Testament or New.

Jesus goes to prove that God's mercy and forgiveness and redemption
is not just for those of us who believe or somehow "accept Jesus,"
but also for the unbeliever and stranger.

God's kingdom come is to *all* creation, believer and non-believer.

Now, traditionally when an important person comes to town
everyone comes out to welcome that person.

A big deal is made of visits by important people.

Sometimes parades are held.

Important town leaders dress up in suits and shake hands for photo ops.
Speeches are given.

Political candidates are starting up their great campaign posturing,
with smiles and cheering crowds and all-important media.

Prominent people bring a big to-do.

Jesus was about as important as they come, being the Son of God and all.

If some mere emperor or prince or movie star showed up, paparazzi would set up camp and stalk.

But the only person to hail and cheer Jesus *was a crazy man!*

The good citizens, sensible and practical,
are clueless to the importance that has come to their land!

Only a man *out of his mind* recognizes God!

That's the first joke; only a crazy person greets Jesus!

The man with the demon was in torment.

He could not control himself.
He knew something was wrong, but could not know how to be normal.
Clothes frightened him.
No one would let him live in town,

so he found shelter in caves where the dead were buried,
chatting it up with bleached skulls and dried femurs.

He scared people, so they tried to lock him up, but he just broke the chains and ran away.

Demons tormented him.

But when he saw Jesus, he screamed that *Jesus* tormented him!

It was the demons inside speaking.

The man was not himself.

Jesus asked, "What is your name?"

Once someone knows our name, they have power to call on us.
It's as serious as getting someone's PIN number
and having access to their bank accounts.

Knowing someone's name makes them vulnerable to your beck and call.
The demons had no choice,

Jesus commanded an answer and they had no power to resist.
"Legion" they answer.

Not one, but *many, many* demons occupied the man's mind.
In the Roman army at the time of this story,
a legion was made up of *5 thousand* soldiers.

There were many, *many* demons in the man.

Demons were squatters on the man's soul.

They belonged in the abyss where evil things are kept.

Jesus will not permit this wrong, this robbery of life.

Yet the demons don't want to go to the abyss either;
they know what horrors are there.

So they beg Jesus to enter *pigs*.

This is a second joke.

Swine are filthy animals to the Jews.

Old Testament commandments prohibit *even touching* pigs.

Story listeners would have laughed at demons entering pigs.

Pigs are an appropriate place for filthy demons.

Jesus gives permission for the demons to enter pigs instead of assigning to the abyss,

Jesus *is merciful* after all.

But demons only ruin whatever they touch.

The demon-crazed pigs rush down the hill into the water.

In the Old Testament the deep ocean, deep waters
were places where sea monsters live.

Deep waters were just as bad as the abyss.

The demons run from abyss into monster-infested seas,
ending up in "deep water" *anyway!*

The third "joke" is the reaction of the townspeople.

For years they were afraid of the demon-possessed man.

Now when they come out to see what in the world was going on
the man was "in his right mind."

The man was as sane as any of *them!*

The demon-less man was as calm as can be,

sitting with Jesus, chatting about the weather, fully clothed and content.

And they were afraid!

They can handle a little demon-possession,
but *sanity* freaks them out!

A fourth joke is what people do in response to God showing up.

The townspeople ask Jesus *to go away*.

They cannot tolerate God's mercy and rescue!

God changes things for the better

and it's more than people can bear!

You know what it's like.

Some people won't tolerate a mosque located in their town.

Some people are progressive and all,

but just can't bear a low-income high-rise in the neighborhood.

Some people won't put up with reformed sex offenders moving near.

God changes things for the better and it's more than people can bear!

So instead, it's *the victim*,
 the former demon-possessed, now healed and restored,
 who declares the wonders of God.
 It may be that sensible, comfortable, liberal, middle-class Christians
 may not know Jesus as well as someone else.

This story is not so much about Jesus exorcising demons.
 This story is intended to be a humorous and funny story
 of God's power in this world changing things, making things right.
 We *laugh* at the devil's threats,
 ridicule the devil's scary faces,
 because we know God is bigger than devils,
 God is greater than any frights evil pretends.
 How awful things can be,
 how terrible and cruel others can be, how traumatic our experiences,
 they cannot hold before the justice, mercy and care that God brings.
 We *laugh* at Satan
 and ridicule the devil's empty threats.
 The scary faces of Satan are just so much clowning around with God.

Yet, we often find ourselves among the townsfolk,
 frightened of demons
 and even more frightened of Jesus.
 We are afraid of things out of control,
 but *even more* frightened of what happens if things come under control.
 Choosing to live with *familiar* torment
 is preferred over healing to *unfamiliar* joy.

Demons of scripture—and demons of our current reality—
 drive victims to self-destructive behavior.
 Demons entered a herd of swine and drove them into a lake to drown.
 That is one characteristic of demons,
 they ruin and wreck whatever they touch.
 The victims themselves feel trapped by their condition.
 They want something different, but don't know how to get it.
 They want life to be different, but cannot make the change needed.
 Demons isolate people.
 Demons separate people from normal family living.
 Demons cause families to deteriorate and victims to wither.
 This is a common reality even now.
 Victims of domestic abuse watch friendships erode,
 are often ashamed of what they endure,
 caught between love and fear of the same person,
 bewildered by how what once was good had now become corrosive.
 Normal family life becomes ruin and chaos.

Fear paralyzes.
 Even now demonic deception drives us to deny a better future.
 This church cannot continue the way things are.
 We are on a downward path, picking up speed.
 Even now this congregation cannot afford this beautiful space.
 Costs outstrip member giving.
 Good causes struggle for enough volunteers.
 Church staff increasingly take on tasks not related to their jobs.

There is before us an intriguing idea of being a church bigger than Lake Nokomis Lutheran.

We are considering a church as partnership,
 reflecting the Triune relational nature of God,
 of distinct congregations in mutual ministry, three churches in one space.

We don't know how this will work,
 and it is far from certain that it will,
 yet the Holy Spirit is drawing us into conversation
 that even if three churches in shared space does not happen,
 that something better and bigger will come out of this effort.

Three-church in shared space
 is unsettling, dramatically different, uncertain and unpredictable,
 life-changing and complacency-disruptive,
 as disruptive as the town crazy made sane and whole.

But I invite us to think of the 3-church idea differently.
 Instead of fretting and fearing what we will lose and jumping to figuring out how this will work,
 I suggest laughing a bit.

Can you see how funny we all are?
 We get all serious about protecting "our church"
 when it really is God's gift in the first place,
 a gift built by those who have gone before us
 and one we cannot possess as our own.

Can you see how funny we are?
 Thinking that this congregation is the sole way God graces?
 That we are in this alone, trying to be church by ourselves?

Can you laugh at our weakness,
 that our struggling church still makes so much a difference
 in giving home for the homeless in August,
 in giving food for those who don't have enough,
 in nurturing faith and goodness in children, youth and adults,
 in striving for justice in housing and environment,
 that we few members can do so much
 because we are in partnership with other churches,
 because God's Spirit moves us to something greater than ourselves?

Can you laugh at surprises that turn up in spite of our plans?

Can you laugh at uncertainty
 like a child opening a present,
 not knowing what's inside but excited and delighted at whatever comes out?

Can you laugh with excitement over what 3-Church can be,
 anticipating wonders unseen at the moment?

Can you laugh the laugh of faith
 that whatever might come, that Jesus is making right and making better?

No one can live by themselves.
 No one is in control of their destiny.

We need each other.
 We are stronger when we care for each other.
 We are more when we live for one another, when we live for one another's *churches*.

The power of faith,
 the power of trust in God's grace,
 the power of unshakeable assurance in God's power
 is the ability to laugh,
 to laugh at Satan's threats,
 to laugh at fear
 to laugh at uncertainty,
 for Jesus has come.

Amen.

Children's sermon: Knock, knock jokes**Knock, knock***Who's there?***Cargo***Cargo who?***Cargo beep, beep and vroom, vroom!****Knock, knock***Who's there?***Lena***Lena who?***Lena a little closer, and I'll tell you another joke!****Knock, knock***Who's there?***Ice cream soda***Ice cream soda who?***Ice scream soda people can hear me!****Knock, knock***Who's there?***Oscar***Oscar who?***Oscar silly question and get a silly answer!****Knock, knock***Who's there?***Hatch***Hatch who?***God bless you!****Knock, knock***Who's there?***Tank***Tank who?***You're welcome.**