

Naming Our Demons
By Rev. Dr. Fritz Ritsch
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Luke 8: 26-39

“Please continue to pursue the things we need to become one people. It’s not a white thing. It’s not a Black thing. It’s an American thing!”
Opal Lee, b. 1926, The “Grandmother of Juneteenth”

Around this time last year, Margaret and I were in Fort Worth, where we participated in a march with Ms. Opal Lee, the 94-year-old retired schoolteacher and firecracker of a great-grandmother who walked all the way from Fort Worth to Washington to make the case for making Juneteenth a national holiday. As you probably know, Juneteenth is a holiday long celebrated in the Black community that commemorates June 19, 1865, the day that the general commanding advancing Union troops announced at the farthest point of the defeated Confederacy, Galveston TX, that enslaved Blacks were freed by order of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

Now Ms. Opal was at the front of a huge parade, comprising thousands of people of all races mostly from Fort Worth, ensconced in a trailer with a huge umbrella to block the intense Texas sun, surrounded by local Black pastors and politicians. When we arrived at the Tarrant County courthouse, Ms. Opal got up on the steps filled with joy and laughter. “Seeing you all here, I did my holy dance,” she laughed, reflecting her Christian upbringing as a Black Pentecostal. “I embarrassed my children.” She went on: “I tell everybody: make yourself a committee of one. You know somebody who’s not on the same page: change their mind! If they can be taught to hate, they can be taught to love.... Please continue to pursue the things we need to become one people. It’s not a white thing. It’s not a Black thing. It’s an American thing!” (From a video I took of her speech that day.)

This diminutive ball of nearly century-old energy is the living proof that one person really can make all the difference.

Perhaps her example would have comforted the now-healed former Gerasene demoniac who, after being healed, wanted to go with Jesus and his disciples but instead Jesus orders him to “Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.” Often missed in our telling of this story is that these events happened in Jerasa, in Gentile territory, in what is today modern Jordan. This was Jesus’ first foray into Gentile country, and rather than Jesus going himself to witness to that territory, he sends this man to be the missionary to the Gentiles—a man known throughout the territory to have been possessed by a demon or at least crazy as a loon.

Often brave iconoclasts and prophets are portrayed as crazy or demon-possessed by those who don’t want to hear from them. The Artist Formerly Known as Legion was going out of the frying pan of demonic possession into the fire of trying to change an entire culture as a committee of one. He’d probably be relieved to know that there would be people like Opal Lee who would do the same thing—and really make a difference.

Opal Lee and so many others before her and still at work represent the ongoing process of cracking, and finally dismantling, white racism and its systemic pervasiveness in a nation that declares that it believes that all people are created equal. The story of the Gerasene demoniac is exactly about that—dismantling cultural oppression. “No, it’s about an individual person possessed by a demon,” people will reply. I beg to differ. The demoniac is what family systems theory calls the “identified patient”—that is, the person who bears the burden of a family’s sickness, the one who everyone thinks is the problem when the truth is the whole system is sick, but it’s all been dumped on him.

Note for instance, that when Jesus asks him his name, his response is “Legion.” This isn’t just another word for “Mob,” as it is mistranslated in some Bibles. The Syrian branch of the Roman Legion was stationed in the booming city of Jerasa, a wealthy, multicultural market city, populated by Syrians and Jews. This is why, by the way, there are herds of pigs everywhere: an army lives on its stomach. The Romans, of course, were not native to Jerasa or any other part of the Middle East. They ruled the land by conquest or arrangements with puppet rulers who used the Roman Legions to quash dissent.

The Gerasene demoniac was somehow a victim of that Roman occupation. In fact, demon possession in Scripture often doesn't represent an individual's particular problem, but the illness of the people as a whole. Writes biblical scholar Matthias Heintz, "The hostile spirits live outside the body but can take possession of it, live in it and cause havoc...but it is a foreign intruder. It can be expelled. The possessed can be freed and can be cleansed again." Essentially, demons are a type of foreign invasion. From the perspective of our story, just as the demoniac has been 'possessed' by a hostile demon, the entire ancient Middle East has been "possessed" by the Roman Legion--a hostile spirit that has taken possession of the land, lives in it and causes havoc—but it is a foreign intruder. It can be expelled.

The New Testament belief in demons is based upon the idea that life on earth is not alone. Not in the sense of life on other planets and UFOs, but in the sense of spiritual powers both good and evil at work in the world. Humans don't by themselves determine the course of events. Rather, the interaction between humanity and these spiritual powers is reflected in the realities we see around us. From the Bible's perspective, if we don't take these spiritual powers seriously, especially the malevolent powers, if we imagine they are not real, then by refusing to name them we are actually giving them power over us.

These days, we hear from some that racism is not a systemic problem, it is an individual problem. There are racists, but there's no such thing as systemic racism, they say. Likewise we hear that gun culture is not a problem; rather it's evil individuals who use guns for evil purposes. From a Biblical perspective, the argument actually goes the other way: individual acts of racism are actually evidence of systemic, pervasive racism. Active shooters gunning down schoolchildren are an exceptionally malevolent symptom of an extraordinarily unhealthy national relationship with guns and the power they represent. From a biblical perspective you could argue that the nation is possessed by the demons of institutional racism and gun violence; and Derek Chauvin putting his knee on George Floyd's neck and the teen who killed all those children at Robb Elementary are simply symptoms of this national demonic possession.

The people resisting the ideas of institutional racism or the subversive power of our national gun obsession, the people who argue that white school children shouldn't learn uncomfortable truths about white

mistreatment of non-whites in our nation, the ones who proclaim that “good guys” with guns can deal with “bad guys” with guns as if it was so clear who is good and who is bad, the ones who say the nation is good and individuals are evil—they are resisting the reality of spiritual powers at work in the world that left unchecked can lay siege to a whole people. They are resisting the idea of systemic corruption that becomes so pervasive that we do not even recognize it.

But you can see it in history. People might point to other examples, like the way Nazism corrupted an entire nation and nearly corrupted all of Europe. But our own nation’s history is full of examples. The most obvious are slavery and racism themselves. Two hundred years ago very good and decent people might have deeply set ideas that you and I would consider heinous today. In the South, a good Christian might have believed that slavery was a sad necessity or even that Black people were not quite human. In the north, even those who viewed slavery as the evil it was would likely believe that Blacks were unintelligent and inferior to whites. Even among abolitionists there were different views: many believed that all Blacks should be freed and immediately sent to Liberia, because Blacks and whites really shouldn’t live together in America. Only a handful of the most enlightened abolitionists believed in the fundamental equality of the races and that all should live together in America.

This is a perfect example of the pervasive, systemic power of sin. Two hundred years ago a whole nation of people like you and me believed that Opal Lee was fundamentally flawed because of the color of her skin.

I’ve always said that there is one Biblical doctrine that is easily empirically provable, and that is the doctrine of sin. All you have to do is look at the headlines on any newspaper any day of the week. And Christians have always held that the problem of sin is *systemic* as well as individual: as Paul says, “For *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Even fundamentalists believe that “In Adam’s fall, sinned we *all*,” as the old Salem Primer said.

So why do we find it so hard to believe in the pervasive, institutional and cultural realities of racism and White Privilege? Simply put: Naming the problem is the first step to casting out the demon. And we have all, at some level, drunk the Kool-Aid. The one thing we are most afraid to see is

that the demon is within us. And yet if we are willing to name it, then it becomes possible for Jesus to cast it out.

For White Christians, the hardest work we have to do comes with recognizing our white privilege and making moral decisions about it. But it starts with just recognizing that it is real. Recognizing our white privilege and how culturally for four centuries the privileges and opportunities we take for granted have been denied to people of color, can make us reassess our unconscious assumptions about people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Just by daring to see this in ourselves honestly we begin to break the demonic hold racism has on us.

Understanding that this as a spiritual battle and not simply a cultural one is helpful in a couple of ways. Remember what I said earlier about demons: they are *foreign intruders*. They can be expelled. It is not natural for us to be racist. It is not natural for us to judge others by the color of their skin. It is a foreign intruder in our souls. It is not us. And if we claim who we are called to be, who we are made to be, and who we intend to be as a nation and as individuals, that foreign intruder can be expelled.

The other thing to remember is that the spiritual forces at work in our nation and in our lives are not only demons but angels. As Lincoln so beautifully put it, we can live into “the better angels of our nature.” Those angelic forces are even more powerful than the demonic ones. A single individual of great faith and perseverance can upset the apple cart of those corrupting forces and become part of a larger movement to overcome the corrupting demonic powers of institutional racism and the idolatry of gun worship. Ephesians tells us that Christ “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” More than once Opal Lee has given credit to God for what she has been able to do to impact racism over the course of her lifetime. It doesn’t mean it’s been easy: she has actually been a civil rights activist her whole life. It started when white racists burned her house down on Juneteenth when she was twelve years old. But her confidence that God can do more than she could ask or imagine has sustained her over decades to where she has arrived today.

And now Jesus sends you and me out, like the healed man formerly known as Legion, into a world still possessed by the demon that Jesus has expelled from our lives. It is daunting, it is scary, but it is necessary. The

problems that need to be overcome are realer and more deeply ingrained than we realize. When black and white religious leaders in Fort Worth began working together a sobering moment came as we were trying to define our mission. We started with the word “reconciliation” but the Rev. Ken Jones, pastor of the Black First Baptist Church of Como, stopped us. “We have never really lived together in peace, unity and equality to begin with. So how can we say ‘be reconciled’? We need to be ‘conciled’ before we can be ‘reconciled.’” That work of *conciliation* is the work ahead of us.

Realistic about the challenges before us dealing with both institutional racism and gun violence, nonetheless we go out like the man formerly known as “Legion” to confront the cultural demons that Jesus is freeing us from, confident that the power of Christ is at work in us, who can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine. He can give our meagre work far more transformative power than we can conjure up within ourselves. We go out each of us, as a committee of one—to begin with. Opal Lee could do it, and so can we.