

## Deep Calls Unto Deep

Luke 8:26-39; Psalm 42

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, June 23, 2019*

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God (1-2).” This beautiful and poetic line from Psalm 42 can be a balm for the soul of every person who has experienced suffering, despair, depression, and oppression. I still recall visiting an elderly gentleman who had suffered a severe stroke and could hardly speak. When we read the words of the Psalm, the tears just started to stream down his face. He was moving between feeling that all was lost and resting with some solace in God’s presence amidst the pain. Or, as I will focus on later in the sermon, imagine a Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Queer, Transgender or Questioning, Asexual or Intersex (LGBTQIA) teen who is longing for connection and finds themselves ridiculed, ostracized and in danger of losing touch with the deeper sense of their connectedness and worth. How might they hear these words of longing in our Psalm?

The Psalmist tells a story of having once felt deeply connected and engaged. He used to lead the procession into the Temple with shouts and songs of thanksgiving (4). Now, this person sometimes feels that the taunting and oppressive voices of “Where is your God?” (5.9-10) drown out his sense of belonging. But at other times, there still is a deeper knowing that calls him back to a hope in God at a deep and existential level. “Deep calls unto deep at the thunder of your cataracts” (7), the Psalmist writes. There is a depth of connection with the divine below the surface level of the chorus of diminishment, taunting, undermining and projecting that is coming at him. This person is struggling but still connected and can say with confidence: “By day God commands steadfast love and at night God’s song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life” (8). There is something unshatterable blooming out of shatteredness (see poem by Rashani in the bulletin).<sup>1</sup> Out of the brokenness emerges the unbroken as deep calls unto deep.

However, when we come to the person described in our story from Luke, we encounter someone who is at that particular time unable to tune into this deeper connection and trust. Only the broken and shattered aspects of life are apparent. The encounter with Jesus restores

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<sup>1</sup> [www.rashani.com](http://www.rashani.com), “The Unbroken.”

this connection. They meet because Jesus has come from his home area of Galilee across the lake to non-Jewish territory. On the way over, Jesus stilled a storm that frightened his disciples out of their wits (Luke 8:22-25). When they arrive in the Gentile country of the Gerasenes, they immediately encounter a man who “had demons” and was ridden by a storm of a different making. Originally, the Greek word *daemon* does not always connote a destructive energy.<sup>2</sup> However, in this context the word “demons” seems to refer to an oppressive voice or energy that distorts or overpowers healthier voices. It does so in a way that the man’s thinking and behaving is no longer able to perceive, reflect, claim or affirm his identity as beloved children of God. The so called “Gerasene demoniac” seems completely traumatized and disconnected. Jim Finley, Christian mystic and clinical psychologist, says that trauma can cause us to lose experiential access to the existential connection/ belief in our belonging to God, ourselves and others. This is what can make life so unbearable and seems to be on display here.

This person has worn no clothes for a long time and has been living among the tombs. There is nothing life-giving here but, still, a powerful energy is displaying its force. The community has kept the man under guard and bound him with chains and shackles. Nevertheless, he was occasionally able to break them only to be driven into the wilds by the demons inside (8:29). Jesus has commanded the demon/spirit to come out of him and it is this unhealthy spirit or voice that shouts through the man: “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” When Jesus asks, “What is your name?” the answer is “Legion” (8:30). In Jesus’ time, this term was likely associated with the Roman legion, denoting a unit with a large number of trained soldiers. Whether this was an intentional finger pointing at the Roman occupiers or not, we can hear in this name an expression of the immensity and intensity of the oppressive force that has taken a hold of this man. As David Lose suggests, this man was exposed to so many destructive messages and voices that he no longer had a clear sense of his own identity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, (Random House: New York) 2019, 111.

<sup>3</sup> David Lohse in *Feasting on the Word*, (Westminster John Know: Louisville, KY) 2010, 167-169.

Along similar lines, James Allison, a British theologian and LGBTQAI<sup>4</sup> activist, reads this story as an example of the power of scapegoating.<sup>5</sup> This is one potential way of reading the story and I am not addressing today the complexities of mental health and illness. Some of you listened to Allison speak about this scripture passage during our Lenten series. Scapegoating is a mechanism of keeping a community or group together around a sense of belonging and purpose without needing to address shadows, contradictions, and internal competition. The negative energies are projected onto a victim who is an easier target for ostracism and abuse because they somehow do not as easily fit the ethnic, racial, physical, religious, economic, sexual orientation or gender identity (etc.) norm.

We have seen this happening on a large scale in the Nazi Holocaust against Jews, People of a different sexual orientation, people with cognitive disabilities, political dissenters. We still find it in the festering legacy of racism in this country and the current wholesale depiction of people trying to come here as refugees. It happens daily in our work places, families, schools, and on the playground. At its worst, scapegoating or any other form of victimization can rob a person of their own sense of health and dignity. The negative projections can become so internalized that a person begins to become destructive to themselves and sometimes their environment. For Allison, this texts shows what can happen gradually when a person is exposed to judgment, bullying, rejection and diminishment over time.<sup>6</sup> Imagine, for example, a high schooler who is LGBTQIA and is so mistreated and judged that they become suicidal, flunk out of school, become homeless and run into trouble with drugs.

As this is LGBTQIA awareness and pride month, I would like to spell out the extent to which our LGBTQIA youth are suffering right here in Maine right now. The wonderful organization

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<sup>4</sup> LGBTQIA – Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual.

<sup>5</sup> Allison was a speaker at the 2016 “Everything Belongs” CONSPIRE conference of the Center for Action and Contemplation (see [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org) for access to the conference videos).

<sup>6</sup> Allison then also develops the case for seeing Jesus become the scapegoat of our negative projections to put an end to reveal scapegoating for what it is and to end the cycle of abuse. The risen Christ does not seek revenge or simply remain a victim and breaks through the cycle of violence. It is not God who demands scapegoats but we have been doing so.

OUTMAINE lists the following statistics about LGBTQIA youth in Maine worth noting (see [www.outmaine.org](http://www.outmaine.org)):

- 8 out of 10 are bullied regularly in schools
- 3X to 4X the suicide rate of heterosexual peers
- 3X as likely to feel sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in the past year
- 25-40% of Maine homeless teens are LGBTQ
- More than doubly likely to experience domestic violence in the home
- High risk of substance abuse (twice the usage rate of heterosexual teens of heroin, cocaine and inhalants)
- More than 3X the rate of forced sexual contact than heterosexual students.
- LGBTQIA Youth in rural Maine deal with additional challenges of not having access to services and support groups that are more likely to be sensitive to their needs.

Keeping the scale of the suffering in mind, let us return to the story. The demons in the story beg Jesus not to return them to the abyss but to send them into the nearby herd of pigs. In this non-Jewish territory, these pigs were the livelihood of some farmers. In Jesus' original culture, pigs were regarded as unclean and unfit to eat. We are probably getting a cultural bias here of using the poor pigs as the recipient of the spirits. The pigs are driven so mad that they rush down a steep bank to the lake and drown. The scapegoating has been transferred from the man to the pigs which does not solve anything. The work of transformation is not finished.

The pig farmers run off to tell others in the town about what has taken place. They return as a collective and are stunned to see the man who was possessed sitting there "clothed and in his right mind." The people react with fear and ask Jesus to leave (Luke 8:34-37). While Jesus can cast out the oppressive spirits, he will not force anything on the people. Lohse suggests that it can be easier to restore an individual than to restore a community that is fearful (Ibid.,169). They were at least used to this man even when he seemed out of his mind. They do not know what to do with him now, nor have they actually dealt with what made his life so miserable in the first place. Much work remains to be done.

When Jesus gets ready to get into the boat to leave again, the man who has been healed and freed from this oppression begs Jesus to let him come along. Jesus responds by saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you (8:38-39).” Jesus asks him to follow him not by coming along the road to share his story in another place but to reclaim his place in his community. He is to help transform his community right there. That is a tall order and potentially dangerous. A protective part of me wants to say, ‘Don’t do that to him. He will only get hurt again.’ The story goes on to say, though, that this man found the courage to proclaim the Gospel throughout the city. As we are in the season of Pentecost, this story is also a celebration of the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives when we can tune into its power.

Importantly, the story affirms the dignity and power of the one who is now once again in touch with his own identity as a gifted child of God. Deep has called unto deep and hope has been restored. Something unshatterable has bloomed out of the shatteredness. Jesus has mirrored the love, courage, and acceptance the man needed. He knows again who and whose he is and the destructive voices no longer have a say in that. He speaks out with courage and clarity. LGBTQIA people have, over time, found their voices, spoken up and demanded to be heard and seen as worthy expressions of God’s beautiful and diverse creation. This has always been risky and has come at a great cost to many.

Thankfully, by now we have organizations like OUTMAINE who actively embrace, affirm, educate and empower individuals and our wider community. As an Open and Affirming congregation, we are called upon to not only celebrate diversity in theory but to actively embrace, invite, **affirm, and empower** people to live out their identity as beloved children of God.<sup>7</sup> As we move forward as a congregation, let us consider how we are called to participate in this transformation. Every child of God deserves to hear the deep love of God resonate in the depth of their own being so that they are not only left to thirst for God like for living streams of water but can drink from God’s love and grace, freely.

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<sup>7</sup> ONA is not only limited to LGBTQIA concerns but this is one vital aspect of the welcome we say we want to embrace.