

## The Demons We Know

June 19, 2022

This past week, Becca and I watched the Disney movie *Encanto* for the first time. The premise of the story is that there is an extended family whose members each have a supernatural power. They all use their gifts for the good of the townspeople around them, and they are well loved by everyone. For example, one woman has superhuman strength, and she is constantly fixing buildings or gathering up wandering donkeys on her back to return to their owners. Another woman can influence the weather depending on her mood, so she brings sunshine and happiness to those around her. Another person can make flowers grow wherever she walks.

The catch is that each member of the family is profoundly unhappy. They experience a constant pressure to make others happy, even at the expense of their own health and well-being. Imagine forcing yourself to always be happy so that the sun shines for your neighbors. Or imagine working yourself to physical exhaustion because your identity is tied up in your strength. Their gifts, as it turns out, are burdens and sources of constant pressure.

The thing is that these members of this magical family never admit, some even to themselves, how miserable they are. They keep doing what they've always done, because it's all they know. And all that pain and pressure is swept under the rug. One family member, prior to the story, has left the family and become a hermit, and the family's response is to never talk about that person anymore.

Eventually, change happens when one family member starts listening to her sisters and aunts and uncles. The family members start to actually lose their powers, and eventually their magical house literally collapses around them. Then, they must all face the fact that something is deeply wrong, and out of that moment of pain comes change and growth and new life.

*Encanto*, directed by Jared Bush and Byron Howard (Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2021), 1:42.

It's a wonderful movie; I'd highly recommend it. In addition to the powerful story, there are all kinds of fun, catchy songs and beautiful scenery of Colombia, where the film is set. And of course, the movie captures a deep truth about who we are and how we like to behave. We prefer the devils we know to change that we don't know.

We see this truth in a very real way in Luke's Gospel story today. Jesus goes to Gentile territory, on the far side of the sea of Galilee. He is met by a man who is possessed by a legion of demons, thousands of demons. They make the man so uncontrollably insane that the man has to be chained up. But he apparently has broken the chains and has run off naked into the wilderness to live in tombs by himself. This man is an outsider even to the outsiders.

When Jesus meets the man, he asks him a tender question: "What is your name?" That question alone tells us a lot about Jesus. Our Lord treats this man whom others have given up on with humanity and compassion. The demons answer Jesus, and they know that he has come to cast them out. So the demons ask Jesus to not drive them into the abyss, the bottomless pit that was reserved for God's enemies, but rather into some nearby pigs, where they think they'll be safe. So Jesus gives them permission. The pigs are driven mad by the demons, run into the lake and

drown, and the demons thus go to the abyss anyways. Moral of the story: Jesus has the ultimate authority and always wins; evil meets its own demise. And everyone lives happily ever after.

Oh. Wait a second. That's not how the story ends! We have this whole last paragraph about how the townspeople respond. The reality is that Jesus has just bankrupted this entire town. Wealth was not always measured in money in those days; it was measured in land or in livestock. Jesus has cast demons into sacks of hundred-dollar bills that have just disappeared... Not to mention those pigs were living creations of God who have now perished.

But the thing is, those townspeople aren't angry that Jesus just sank their local economy. They are afraid for what this means for their community. "We had things worked out," they might say to Jesus. "This man Legion lives in the tombs and keeps to himself. And now you've changed all that!" Now the townspeople have to live with the-man-formerly-known-as-Legion as their neighbor! (After all, Jesus tells the man to stay rather than come with him.) Jesus has upset the apple cart, and the locals are scared. And they ask Jesus to leave.

Now we might be tempted to say, "Those silly townspeople! How can they be afraid? They have received a great gift!" But that is who we are as humans. We prefer the demons we know to a situation that is unfamiliar.

This is something that we know from psychology. In a family system, if one member is suffering from (for example) addiction, the rest of the family puts up with destructive behavior or even enables it because that situation is familiar. Those family members are ignorant or self-destructive; they are human. Almost all of us would do the same in that situation. We humans prefer the familiar, even if the familiar is riddled with demons.

This is the same reason why someone might stay in a toxic relationship. It's why someone remains in a friend-group that is unhealthy. It's why a town keeps re-electing a destructive mayor or leader. Change, even healthy change, is hard... and it is scary. And I appreciate that Luke includes this very real, very human reaction to Jesus' healing. The people in the town are afraid and don't know what to make of this new system.

Now it's fitting that today/tomorrow is June 19<sup>th</sup>, a newly minted federal holiday, when we celebrate the end of slavery in the United States. You history buffs might know that the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. But it wasn't until 2 and a half years later, when federal troops marched into Galveston, Texas, on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1865, that the last slaves were freed.

It's fitting that we read this Gospel story of the Gerasene demoniac today, because events played out in our country the same way they played out in the story. There was this moment of healing when slavery ended, this chance at a new, bright future. But the reality was that economic system of half our country was destroyed. And just as the townspeople had to wrestle with Jesus' healing of this man, we as a country wrestled with one another through the period of Reconstruction, and how to live together as equals of different races.

We struggled as a country through Jim Crow laws and segregation, through the Civil Rights movement, and we struggle even to this day, with the fact that someone growing up white and someone growing up black in our country have very different experiences. Making changes is hard, even healthy ones, even when everyone agrees on how to proceed (which is not the case now).

And today we hear Paul's words to the Galatians. "We are all one in Christ Jesus; there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female." We might think, "Ah, the early Christians had it figured out." But the reality is that Paul wasn't describing an actual situation so much as he was describing his hope, his aspirations.

In Galatia, there were terrible conflicts between factions of the early Christians. They argued over whether you had to follow the Jewish law to follow Jesus. Were women allowed? Could slaves follow Jesus? Paul's letter might sound poetic and utopian, but he was writing to a society that was being torn apart by arguments. In light of the new, joyful, hopeful Gospel, people struggled with change.

And that is who we are as humans. If there is a lesson, if there is inspiration that we can glean from this Gospel story, it is that fear can paralyze us and prevent us from growing. Fear gets in the way of healthy change. Those townspeople were scared of the change that Jesus implemented, and so they asked him to leave.

I have to admit to you, that I try not to be scared when I read the news. But the events that took place at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Vestavia Hills, Alabama, on Friday left me scared in a way that other tragic events have not. That one hit a little too close to home for me.

And our Vestry has talked about how to proceed. One Vestry member is reaching out to our local police department to see if they can come and assess how we can stay safe. Our Learning Center is adding safety protocols.

But it's scary. And it's hard. And it is unbelievably sad. And we do our best to not be afraid. Fear is the goal of people who commit terrible crimes like this.

And so we do our best to hear the words that Jesus offers so many times, that the apostles offer to those they help, that God's messengers speak to all whom they see: "Don't be afraid." Fear gets in the way of growth. And we must grow as Christians, as Americans, as human beings in a hurting world.

Amen.