

# Naming Our Demons

sermon digest

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Luke 8:26-39

larry dipboye

Tennessee made the national news last week. A judge in Newport overruled the mother of a seven-month-old boy named “Messiah” and changed his name to Martin. The Judge might have been right about the future difficulty that may be caused by being associated with a title given to Jesus in the Gospels, but human rights advocates are outraged by the audacity of the court claiming the authority of naming a child normally reserved for parents. Several commentators have noted that Messiah is a title in the Bible, not a name, and that it has become a popular choice for names in recent years, raising serious questions about the judge’s opinion that it would be a problem name.

You may remember the 1969 Johnny Cash recording in San Quentin Prison of the humorous song “A Boy Named Sue.” The song is a saga of a quest for revenge by a boy abandoned by his father at age three with the name of Sue. The song was released when I was a pastor in a small town in Kentucky. The big burly owner of a local store was “Sally” Applegate. I had to ask one of his friends where this guy who had absolutely no feminine traits got pegged with Sally. It seems that as a child, his mother let his hair grow into long curls, so James was teased as Sally and carried the name the rest of his life.

I grew up in Texas. Governor Jim Hogg (from 1890-1895) was remembered for naming his daughter Ima. Some thought that it was a cruel joke on the child. Others attributed the name to a political publicity stunt, but Ima Hogg spent her entire life avoiding the name assigned to her by her father. The legend that he had another daughter named Ura Hogg was just a legend. Ima never had a sister. Ima never married and used the monogram “I. Hogg” and “Miss Hogg” on her stationery and late in life took the name Imogene.

In the Bible, names were always more than labels to which one answered when called. The name was tied to the core of one’s being. To be blessed or cursed by name was more than words. People believed in the power of both blessing and cursing if attached to the innermost being of one’s name. When Jesus wandered down some thirty-three miles south of the Sea of Galilee into Gentile territory into Gerasa, the grand Roman city founded by Alexander the Great, he immediately encountered the town’s madman. The man lived naked in the graveyard. He was known for superhuman strength and pegged as a demoniac. After an exorcism of his demons, Jesus asked the man’s name. “He said, ‘Legion’; for many demons had entered him.” The power of the exorcist was directly related to knowledge of the name, but Legion was more than a name; it was also a unit of 6,000 Roman soldiers. The story was undoubtedly a subtle reference to the demonic Roman presence in the region. The demons (soldiers) were allowed to possess a herd of swine, a most despised animal for Jews as were the soldiers who occupied their land. The name was Legion. The story is fascinating regardless of your own diagnosis of the health issues described by Mark and Luke, but it raises serious questions of meaning. We can read it as a curiosity, for purposes of entertainment, for the side issues raised by the behavior of the man and the town folk; or we can read the story as a connection to the real world in which we live and dare to ask, can we name the demons of our world or in our lives?

***Is exorcism for real?*** We cannot escape the description of Jesus in the first three Gospels as an exorcist of invisible, supernatural beings called demons. We might also note that the Fourth Gospel John, seems to take exception to Jesus the exorcist. In John, Jesus is accused of having a demon because of his supernatural power and sometimes bizarre behavior, but Jesus does not exorcize demons from others. John describes Judas as possessed by the devil, but other human ills are treated without reference to the demonic. If you are terribly uncomfortable with the idea of demonic powers, I would suggest that you stick with John and avoid the other Gospels. You might also note that Matthew locates two demoniacs, unnamed, in another Gentile town three miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee called Geraza. The disagreement about the facts of the story is enough to indicate that this is a story to help us know Jesus rather than a documentary on his life. If you feel as I do, compelled to know the Jesus of the Gospels, you will deal with the uncomfortable references to the demonic even if you do not see the world or human ills like people in the first century.

In *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* ( p. 41), a second of three books on the meaning of the demonic in our age, Walter Wink refers to demons as the “drunk uncle” of the twentieth century. He credits William Peter Batty’s novel and the 1973 movie *The Exorcist* with a revival of interest in demonic causes of human behavior and raises the question, “Why should people want to believe again in demons?”

We need only to recall the events that we identify with World War II to make sense of the revival of the demonic. How can anyone provide a rational explanation of the systematic slaughter of some six million Jews? How can nations justify the use and continued proliferation of nuclear weapons that threaten to exterminate all of life from this planet? A similar question can be raised about accounts of senseless murders, suicide bombings, and the mad monarchs of our time. Wink recalls the discussion among German theologians about demonic causes of the Nazi evil, which Karl Barth dismissed: "Why all this talk about demons? Why not just admit we have been political idiots (p.54)." But people tend to resort to demonic causes of evil when they cannot bear the thought of accepting the responsibility for unthinkable horrors. Although the evil in Germany could not be explained by invisible spiritual beings invading human minds, the spiritual reality of Nazi political philosophy had infected the minds of the Hitler Youth, the SS, the Gestapo, the acquiescence of the churches, and the myth of Aryan superiority. Wink rightly observes a spiritual power in the political system that "possessed" Hitler's Germany. Wink views demons as the spiritual essence of the material entities as the real demons of our time and probably of the first century as well.

Myron C. Madden was a hospital chaplain in New Orleans when he wrote in 1975 about dealing with death and grief. His book *Raise the Dead!* is about the exorcism of bad memories and false expectations. The pastoral counselor shares stories of real people who carry childhood fears of death into their adult lives and repeatedly advises that we have to "get life out of death" and "get death out of life." Although far from having a perfect understanding of human psychology, Freud deserved the attribute "father of modern psychology" for his comprehension of how childhood memories stay with us throughout our lives. Just as we have to give up stork stories for the biological truth about human reproduction, we have to outgrow childhood fears and turn loose of childish beliefs in order to move on into life. Madden found much of his work to center in helping people name their demons. If they could remember the event or the distortion of truth that plagued their adult lives, they often could leave them behind. They could cast out their demons. But until they could face the thoughts that possessed their memories, they seemed helpless before the darkness that lurked within them.

As a young pastor, John Claypool told of visiting a young man in his congregation who had been admitted to a local psychiatric hospital for treatment of his depression. John observed the religious dimension of sin and guilt that seemed to dominate the young man's conversation, so the pastor decided to engage in a rite of forgiveness, akin to biblical exorcism. He had the man write down every terrible thing that he could remember having done that he regretted and every fear that possessed him about going on with life. Together they prayed for forgiveness and release from the prison of guilt. Then together they went to the toilet where they flushed the words into the sewer, and John gave absolution.

After the tragic death of Brad, Richard Dew tells of going to a Compassionate Friends conference in Seattle. Richard often spoke of the meaningful rites that he experienced in working with this group of folks who had experienced the tragic death of a child. In Seattle, they dealt with carrying a burden of guilt in the remembered regrets that seemed to haunt their lives. They came together and wrote on a piece of paper their regrets, request for forgiveness for their perceived failures, and wishes for the future. The pieces of paper were collected and added to a bonfire where their demons were sent up in smoke. Richard said he seemed to see the smoke curling up from Mount Rainier as they flew out of the city.

Regardless of our view of the biblical picture of demons, I think that we have to affirm Jesus as an exorcist. We have our own legions of demons we have carried with us all of our lives that need to be cast out. But we have to name them. We have to find them, and we have to identify them. We have to locate them in order to find release from their hold on our lives.

**Where are the real demons?** We often read the story of the man from Gerasa as if he were the only person of need. We let ourselves get caught in the issues of location, culture and religious conflicts, and the nature of insanity, while we are totally blind to the "normal" folks in town whose subtle comments raise bigger issues of the demonic than the man whom Jesus healed. Even in Matthew's story, which has a different location and two demoniacs instead of one, the folks in town who came out to see the miracle begged Jesus to leave. Luke comes around to telling a similar story in Acts about the healing of a woman in Philippi possessed of an evil spirit. The town folk prefer to cast out the healer over witnessing a life redeemed.

Maybe we really need our scapegoats. Small towns and big cities have a way of assigning roles to misfits and eccentrics. I still remember with horror the cruelty heaped on a kid in my school who was

assigned the role of being the scapegoat homosexual. The behavior toward this kid was the worst kind of evil. I think that we needed Bobby to make the rest of us feel normal. I remember Willie, a Downs syndrome man who hung around the school yard. Willie carried the burden of retardation for us. Then there was a deaf mute who lived down the street from my family. A local church would invite him in to be healed annually. The town drunk also lived on my street. When he died, the funeral sermon (thankfully not from my church) began, "This man is burning in Hell today."

A strange phenomenon of alcoholics or drug addicts has become something of a cliché in pop psychology. The family of the addict or alcoholic gets itself organized around the addiction in a state of co-dependency. When the addicted person begins to gain control of the problem with alcohol or drugs, the rest of the family goes into chaos. All of us have our own demons to cast out. We really prefer to focus on someone else .

William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, has wisdom coming from the lips of pathetic country ignorance:

Sometimes I aint so sho who's got ere a right to say when a man is crazy and when he aint. Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the balance of us talks him that-away. It's like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it's the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it.