



## **Sermons** **from Northwood United Church**

**“Hearing Voices”**  
**Psalm 42, Luke 8:26-39**  
**Will Sparks                      June 23 2013**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

I love to go to movies, but I have to say that in recent times, I have to watch out for the trailers. And it is amazing what trailers they put before which movies. Sometimes I am with my kids at a kids oriented movie and I see some violent trailer and I think, really? The movie is rated G but the trailer creeps me right out. I have a fairly low creep tolerance, so for me, movies that are intended to scare you, make you look over your shoulder as you walk to the car, they just don't do anything for me. And movies that explore the paranormal, possession- they are amazingly popular. I can't handle them, but clearly there is something in our culture that makes us want to sort this stuff out. Where is the edge of normal human experience? When is life out of control? There is a fear of going over the edge and I think these movies are an outlet for some of that fear.

At the same time, in popular psychology, confronting your demons is meat and potatoes therapy. We recognize that to be human is to have a shadow side, and parts of ourselves can be harmful or ugly, and to be healthy is to integrate these shadows into our conscious life.

Today our scripture story uses words like demon, and describes the experience of a person they say was possessed by demons, many of them, ruining his life. Today I want to invite you to walk with me along that edge of human experience that has been labeled many things over the years, that the scripture calls demon possession, because I think that part of life, for human beings, is lived there.

Do you believe such things as demons exist in the world? Forces of evil? Do you believe that we are effected by such forces, internal, external? Do you believe in them? There was a Baptist preacher one time who was asked, “Do you believed in infant baptism?” And he replied, believe in it? Hell yes, I've even seen it!” Well that's fine for him to say. Of course it exists. We can see it and call it what it is. But exactly what are we seeing in this scripture, this wild guy who is hard to control, breaking chains, driven into the wilds. Something has gone wrong, but what is it that the scriptures are calling demons here? In today's world it is tempting to diagnose this guy with some kind of mental illness. That's what we do these days with things that fall beyond the bell curve of normalcy. That is one way of gaining control over things that scare us, diagnose it and give it a name, “schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, clinical depression.” Is this what is going on with the gentleman fr om Geresá?. “This guy has a chemical anomaly in his brain. If only they had medications back then. And we put this story in a little box with a label, calm in the knowledge that a certain percentage of people deal with such things, and it is hard but we are getting a handle on that medically. And then we can leave this story alone, like a weird trailer before a movie, and get on with the nice parts of life.

But I don't think this is that simple. That is just one possible explanation for a whole lot of things that can lead us as human beings to engage in self-destructive behavior, that leads us to feel overwhelmingly trapped in our life, that leads us to an increasing isolation, separation from family and community. That is what has happened to this poor fellow. He is hurting himself and can't seem to stop. I don't know how it started but we see him in an advanced state of spinning out of control that probably started more mildly than this, but the wilder he got, the more the

authorities felt they needed to confine him, and the more they confined him, the wilder he got, until, when Jesus meets him, he is way off the edge, trapped in a destructive cycle. And by this time everyone is keeping their distance. That is what I see when I read this story- a human being: self-destructive, trapped, and isolated. That could be mental illness. It could also be addiction. It could just be life.

I believe, and I think what scares us most about this stuff, what motivates us to create movies about stuff like this, is that none of us is completely beyond the reach of what I will call, “being in the grip.” “Being in the grip” is being increasingly in a state of being that leads us to hurt ourselves, that leads us to feel trapped, that leads to either pull back from family and friends in embarrassment and shame, or be pushed away by family and friends out of embarrassment, shame or even exhaustion. Life, just life, can send us some really hard curve balls that can throw us off our centre. And you know what can do it. A death, a divorce, a job loss, an job promotion, a serious illness, a trauma. And for whatever reason we become spiritually vulnerable. At that moment, we all hear voices. They can be childhood voices: telling us we don’t belong, telling us we are not good enough, telling us they knew we wouldn’t amount to much. A traumatic experience can bring on the fear voices: watch out, it could happen again, life can’t really be trusted, nobody can be trusted. Sometimes the voices come from the media: with all this crime, you have a lot to be afraid of, subtle voices that cut us down: “you’re fat, you’re ugly, you’ll never measure up,” the “if only” voices, if only I bought this ticket, if only I won just once, if only I lost weight, if only I was something different. Some of these voices are fairly easy to ignore because they are kind of silly voices, but all of them have some power to cut us to the heart, to chip away at our spiritual wellbeing, to effect our soul.

Healing in this realm, in this place where we are vulnerable to the voices within us and outside of us, this is the spiritual realm. Healing of this kind calls for spiritual transformation. This is our territory folks, spiritual transformation. It is no accident that the words that are spoken so often at baptism, the core identity ritual of the church, are something along the lines of “You are a child of God, beloved of God.” This is why we recall the events of Jesus’ baptism and that other voice that said, “You are my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.” These are the counter-voices to those other, distorted voices that lead us to hurt ourselves, feel trapped and hopeless, and become isolated. This voice, in our moment of vulnerability, changes everything.

Back to the story for a moment. Did you notice the reaction of others to the healing of this guy? They really don’t know what to do, but they ask him to leave. They guy wants to go with Jesus, keep on experiencing this moment of transformation because after all that it felt so good. They talk for a while, but Jesus eventually says, you have to go back to your life. You can’t just live in the moment of healing forever. You have to integrate it into your life. But that is hard, because the community doesn’t know what to do, and is almost as afraid of the change as they were of the demon. You’d think they would rejoice but no. Having this guy “clothed and in his right mind” effects them too.

You see as long as that guy can be categorized as somehow “different, weird in some way” we have to handle him, but he is not us. As soon as he is restored, that restoration opens up the possibility that he is more like us that we dare to consider, and we want to push him away. Or consider the possibility that the reason he found himself vulnerable to these voices and got in the grip of these voices has to do with us all. What if the community is sick and he is just the canary in the mine, the indicator of a greater sickness. This incident points to a greater sickness, rooted in the way we deal with guns or sex or fossil fuels, or plastics or garbage, or some sick-making industry. What if Jesus sends him back because the community needs healing?

I believe that there are times in our lives and in the life of the world, when the voice of God, the power of God, however it may come, can heal us. We don’t need to be afraid of life. We don’t need to be afraid of finding ourselves in the grip. We do need to remind each other

over and over of that other voice that is in the world, that is in our life, that offers spiritual transformation, that exposes the lies within the other voice. We need to listen carefully to each other, and speak tenderly the divine voice to each other. For this tender voice, this powerful voice of reassurance and blessing, that goes with the embrace we seek to offer the community. This is the voice of the sturdy fierce angel of God who sidles up in times of vulnerability and whispers in our ear, those other voices? They are hogwash. You belong to God, and don't you ever forget it." And lo and behold, and sometimes only eventually we find ourselves clothed, and in our right mind. Amen