

Sermon
June 22, 2025
Luke 8:26-39

One of my favorite illustrated books is entitled, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy. Many of you probably know this author and the work that is in this book. It was popularized online during the dark days of the pandemic. This author put out regular installments of the story with accompanying drawings. The author was seeking to be uplifting at a time when we all needed Hope.

The printed card in your bulletin is from the book. The mole and the boy are strangers to one another at the beginning of the story. As they are getting to know one another, The mole asks the boy, what do you want to be when you grow up? And the boy's reply is: "kind."

When I first read the boy's response, I was surprised by it. And then I was humbled by it.

We spend so much of our lives trying to answer that question. Adolescence is a particularly poignant time in our emotional growth. It is also a fertile time for spiritual questioning and growth. It is not surprising that many of our impressions and judgments about religion are seated at this time in our lives.

But fortunately for us, we don't forever remain trapped in teenage angst.

As we enter into our twenties and midlife it is not unusual to continue questioning: Who am I?

In my work as a chaplain and pastoral care, it is not uncommon for people nearing the end of their time on earth to engage in a retrospective accounting of their lives. And the question is often Who have I been?

To not know ourselves, to feel untethered to some concept of our identity is disorienting.

In the story from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus comes upon a man who does not know who he is. He says that his name is Legion. But from the story, we realize that this is not his name, but rather the state of his situation. We are told that the man is plagued by demons. He has no clothes and no home. He lives in the tombs with the dead. The townspeople keep him under guard and chained in shackles when he exhibits uncontrollable behavior. When he breaks free from bondage, he has nowhere to run for safety but into the wilds.

When he meets Jesus, he is afraid. No wonder. He believes that Jesus will torment him as well. But instead, Jesus draws near to the man and asks him his name. He respects him by acknowledging his personhood. In response, the man answers that his name is Legion, for many demons have entered him.

Is this not the saddest image of a wounded, hurting human being? He tells Jesus that the demons want to remain inside of him. They do not want to go back to the abyss. Even the demons fear the abyss.

In the odd next bit of narrative, we read that the demons begged Jesus to let them enter the swine that are grazing on a nearby hillside. It is apparently better to become a pig than to be sent back into the abyss. Jesus permits this request. And out of a man called Legion jump the demons and into the herd of swine they go. Now perhaps someone should have cleared this with the swine because they weren't having it. As the demons come out of the man and enter the swine, the herd rushes down the steep bank into the lake and is drowned.

Whether this was always the plan or never the plan, the situation has gotten a little chaotic. Out comes the swine herder and sees that his pigs are no more. He runs back to his fellow townspeople, and they are none too happy about the situation either.

And when they see the man who was known as Legion sitting at the feet of Jesus, looking quite better than he has in a long time, rather than grateful for this healing miracle, they are frightened. They insist that Jesus be on his way.

The man formally known as Legion who is now free of demons and ever so grateful to Jesus wants to follow Jesus. But Jesus says no, he must go back and be a witness to this healing.

Now I can understand the anger of the swine herder. He has lost a great deal of his livestock. He did not agree to this sacrifice. Even if the community is to benefit from the healing of the man called Legion, he only sees it as a loss for himself. He is not willing to make this sacrifice for the benefit of a single man or even the community as a whole.

The response of the community is less easy to understand. There has been no personal loss to them. They are not swine herders.

But perhaps their loss is of a different kind, and one that causes a deeper fear in the human psyche or ego. They have lost the status quo. Before Jesus arrives, they know who they are. They are the people who live in the town, have certain roles, hold to certain beliefs and they are the ones who are not demon-possessed. They do not require healing. The demon possessed is the man whom they keep outside of their town, outside of their community.

Jesus has disrupted their identity. He has disrupted their rules, rules in cultures that are spoken and unspoken. What if the man who has been demon-ridden, worn no clothes, and lived in the tombs wants to move into their town? What if he wants to become integrated into their community? What if Jesus wants to heal them too? Yes indeed, this man Jesus needs to move on.

So, what do we make of Jesus telling the man who has been called Legion to go back to the community? This is a little different than the myriad times Jesus has invited people to follow him. Could it be that this man must go back into the community to find himself? To find out who he is? Presumably, he was once a member of this community and part of someone's family. He has personhood and a name.

If he travels with Jesus, he will not know his connection to the human family. And this community will not know their connection to this man. It might be easier in the short run to see the man called Legion off and away. But that would be short-term self-soothing of the pain. By staying, this community can rebuild their wholeness. Jesus is offering this community the chance to find deep and long-lasting healing as a family.

Jesus likely knows he himself must leave this community just as the man called Legion must stay.

Perhaps healing in this community is best achieved not by a continued show of divine power by Jesus but rather by the living testimony of the one who has been healed and restored. Legion's continual presence among them, renewed in mind, body, and spirit, is a reminder of God's healing power.

Jesus must go and the man called Legion must stay.

Sometimes as children of God, we are called to go forth. We are beckoned to follow a new and uncertain path. Sometimes our call from God is to stay put, where we are. In both adventures, God has called us by name, and God has chosen us for our sacred journey.

For all of here today, for anyone seeking to know God,
We know who we are. We are the children of God. We are members of God's beloved family.

Amen