

## Homily based on Luke 8: 26-39

### Father David I. Giffen

I speak to you in the name of the God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
**Amen.**

Well, I don't know how *other clergy* felt this week, but when I came to prepare my homily on this morning's Gospel reading – I thought to myself – oh why, why does it have to be *me* preaching on this one. Demons and Pigs – I mean – Demons and Pigs. I'm not sure how many of you feel comfortable relating this story of demons and pigs to your lives, but at first glance, I was certainly looking to the Epistle and Old Testament readings, searching for a way out.

But what is it that makes us so uncomfortable with the discussion of this reading. Is it because we feel badly for the pigs – having been subsequently possessed and driven into the sea. Or is it because, our delicate sensibilities, have been offended, by the nakedness portrayed, as the afflicted man in the story is told to have been? Or are we uncomfortable with terminology like 'demons,' or acknowledging the existence of evil in our midst?

His mind shackled, and his body broken, we are told that a man of the city of Gerasenes, a man of affliction and suffering – writhed before Jesus – begging Him not to torment him. Having been afflicted before his community, the people of his city bound and chained him, securing his quarantine from 'normal' society. And so they made the graveyard his home, where he would live amongst the dead, and find no rest for his soul.

I think it's fair to say that the people of the Gerasenes community had as much of a discomfort level with this afflicted man, as we might have with their story.

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A little more than a month ago, our Diocese gathered together at the London Convention Center, for our Annual Diocesan Synod. Our Annual General Meeting was given an eye opening moment on the morning of Synod's convening, when an incredibly courageous delegate approached the microphone to make a statement, and ask for our support.

This remarkably brave man began by sharing with Synod, that he is an individual who has struggled with mental illness for the majority of his life. He is a person, like many others in our society, who requires medication, and other assistance, to cope with this serious affliction in his life. He continued to report that it has only been in recent years, through large leaps of faith, when he has felt safe to speak publicly, and openly, about his struggles and his afflictions.

He quite poignantly pointed out to our Synod, that regardless of whether we speak about secular or sacred culture, church or corporation, our society has set up a an unjust structure, by which we silently encourage people struggling with mental illness to keep a private profile – or to be faced with the consequences of shame.

In a culture which values the convenient, the physically beautiful, the least amount of hassle, the neat and tidy, and the unblemished image, we ask those who fall short of our misappropriated priorities, to get in line, or to get out of the way.

The statement to the church by this courageous man was very clearly articulated *not to be* a condemnation of what the church has failed to be for the mentally ill – but instead this statement was an appeal for what the church can be, and should be, for those outside the neat and tidy box.

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From the darkness of the shadows, within the tombs of the graveyard, Jesus *called forth* the afflicted man. Looking beyond the afflictions *deep inside him*, Jesus chose instead, to see the goodness

of God's creation. When the world around him could only see evil upon him, when all they desired was for this man to disappear – Jesus stood before them, and opened their eyes – to transformation, to healing, and to salvation.

You would think that the community would have erupted in joy – that celebration would have filled the countryside. But as the community got wind of what this healer had done, as they heard of this miracle he has performed – they wanted Jesus gone, they wanted Jesus expelled, and no moment could come too soon.

Having witnessed the unbelievable take place before their eyes – having seen evil cast aside, and having seen good still remain – the people became terribly afraid. It may seem crazy to some, and short-sighted to others, but I think I understand. If this Jesus could expose an evil of such magnitude, right before their eyes, if he could shine a light so bright, on all that which was wrong – then what was next, who was next, what would He come to expose *in them*?

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In both my vocational, and my family life, I have witnessed and walked with those who struggle with mental illness and addiction issues. Whether we talk about it openly or not, I know, that there are very few people whose lives have not come in contact, or been affected, by such afflictions. From a place of experience I can tell you – when you begin to talk about it publically, someone inevitably drops their eyes, someone else will likely leave the room, and many will simply ask you to stop. “That’s personal business,” or “no one needs to know that.” I’ve often wondered why they don’t just say, “Let them deal with their shame alone.”

If my neighbour knows what’s wrong with Joe, then he might just find out what’s wrong with me. And if my co-worker finds out what’s wrong with me, then I will be separated and ostracized from ‘normal’ society. Out of fear for ourselves, and out of fear for our loved ones, we encourage a closeting of identity, and a reinforcing

of stigmas – asking our brothers and sisters around us, not to look at each other too closely – not to see who we *really* are.

We know what we did to you, if you were black, and living in the south, just a few generations ago. We saw what we did to you, if you were a woman in a man's job, not all that long ago. We know we might do to you, if you are gay, and publically display affection, even today.

In a culture which stigmatizes the ways in which God created us, it is no wonder that those with mental illness feel that they must suffer alone, or risk being relegated to the shackles of the graveyard.

By allowing this systemic system of injustice to continue, our society does not allow itself to be transformed. But I do not believe for a second, that for the majority, it is out of a desire to remain ignorant, cruel, or unjust – and I do not believe for a second, that we hesitate out of fear of the transformation itself – it is that we fear the vulnerability, and it is that we fear the exposure, that we must submit ourselves to, before we can be transformed.

We fear what we see in others, might reveal in ourselves.

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The freed and healed man standing before Jesus begged Him to be allowed to stay near – but Jesus sent him away. Jesus told him that he must now go back into the city which rejected him, which chained him, and which desired him dead. He told him that he must go amongst these same people – and proclaim to them all that God has done.

That prophetic man, from the floor of our Synod, hit the nail right on the head. Our culture, our society, and our world, propagate more systems of injustice that I can even begin to count. We see it on TV, we read it in the newspaper, and we witness it before our eyes in the streets.

But the church – the church must be the place in our world, where Christ steps out of the boat, and calls us forward – the vulnerable, the suffering, and the ashamed. The church is the place where we need not hide, where who we are, and what we are, and what we struggle with, will not cause us to be afraid.

I am broken. I am afflicted. I am vulnerable. And I am afraid.

But Christ has died for us, Christ has redeemed us, Christ has transformed us, and Christ has sent us out to do the same.

For we are broken; we are afflicted; we are vulnerable; and we are afraid.

It is in telling the world this though – it is in giving others permission to do the same – that Christ opens our hearts, opens our minds, and opens our arms to each other – so that joined together, as Christ's own body, we shall not need to be afraid.

Thanks be to God.