

"We Know Him"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 12
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 8: 26-39

He wore a perpetual smile on his face and there was a constant glint ever-present in his eyes as if he saw things only he was privileged to see. He marched in every parade in my hometown, carrying a tiny American flag in each hand; always hopelessly out of step, his feet kind of plodding along under the smile and gleaming eyes and stubbled face. He was a source of amusement for us sixteen and seventeen year olds who had the world by the tail and who made fun of the slightest oddity in our world – our world consisting of sports and talk about girls, although not always in that order. When we saw him clomping along, we'd laugh and point and count out the cadence to try to show how silly and ridiculous a bumbling old fool he was, but he always waved and smiled, and never said a word.

He was developmentally disabled, although we didn't call him that, and lived in a half-way house with others in a big home at the edge of town that once belonged to my uncle. He attended every home high school sports event sitting as close as he could to the team as if he was our number one fan.

Now, I was sixth man on a five-man basketball team that won 22 straight games and my standard position was sitting on the bench through three-fourths of every game. Pee Wee (which was the only name I ever knew him by) sat right behind us – the coach was on my right, then there was Ree, named because Pee Wee couldn't pronounce Reece, his real last name, and then Duke, and then Riss, another miss-pronunciation.

We often had to stuff towels in our mouths to stifle ourselves over Pee Wee. He yelled at the wrong times, always, and regularly confused the rules of basketball with those of football and baseball. We imitated his slurred speech and loved it when Reece would be fouled, for then we could chant "Ree, Ree" along with a smiling Pee Wee.

Now, we weren't bad kids. We respected important people. Didn't we shed open and honest tears when John Kennedy was shot and killed? Didn't we even cheer members of the New York Mets when they spoke at our school? And they were the clowns of baseball back then.

But we mocked Pee Wee. We imitated his speech and walked the lumbering, awkward walk of those who don't march to our music. We laughed. The whole town laughed -- even Pee Wee. It had to hurt, but we still laughed.

As I've grown up and, hopefully, matured a bit, I shutter at the telling of this true tale. We were a bunch of cocky, know-it-all kids, who thought the world revolved around us. We were insensitive, sometimes cruel, often judgmental in our view of

others, especially those in our community who were "different." I am ashamed to admit that I never asked his forgiveness. None of us good community kids ever did.

A popular trend that started in the late 90's and still going strong today is people, young and old, wearing bracelets with the letters "WWJD" on them. You know what it means – "What Would Jesus DO?" and that is not a bad question around which to shape our lives and our behavior. What would Jesus do?

Although not an identical story to my opening one, the Gospel presents us with, at the very least, a parallel story and one that allows us to ask the question "What would Jesus do?" The story of the Gerasene demoniac is easily the most dramatic of the exorcism stories in scripture. Note, first of all, where the story takes place: "the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee" (v. 26). This means it was Gentile territory, and for a Jew, nothing about the place was kosher. The unclean spirits, the tombs, the pigs, the land itself, and the people – all were unclean according to Jewish standards. Nothing good could happen there.

And no sooner does the boat dock than this wild-looking creature comes rushing up to Jesus. The gospel writer gives us a clear picture of him. He lives in the place of the dead, among the graves, with the remnants of broken chains hanging on him. He is a man "out of his mind," tormented by demons.

And what does Jesus do when confronted with this unclean, unsafe man, this strange outcast to society? He heals him; he exorcises the demons, and in one of the poignant verses of this story, verse 35, we read: "Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid."

There he was, their Pee Wee, their freak, in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus – a description of a disciple learning from his master, the master who healed him, made him whole, clothed him in righteousness, giving him new life, and how do the people react? They were afraid, and begged Jesus to leave. Doesn't that strike you as odd?

You'd think they would have been overjoyed to have this troubled man, this creature who screamed at night among the tombs, restored to his true self. But they were clearly upset. Why? Some has speculated that they were angry over the loss of their herd. It was, after all, their livelihood and the drowning of all those pigs would surely upset the local economy. But if you noticed they didn't react to the loss of the pigs. They reacted to their Pee Wee sitting calmly and coolly with Jesus acting like one of them.

It gets you thinking, does it not? Maybe he served a useful purpose in his insanity. Maybe they could focus their fears, their angers, their hatred, their prejudices on him. He, perhaps, was the scapegoat for all that was wrong with their lives.

Think about it for a moment. We know that the Roman army occupied this territory. It was not wise to express anger at the Romans; they tolerated not the least bit of opposition. So, the townspeople expressed their frustration at being slaves to Rome by directing it at the wild man who roamed the graveyard. This is not psychobabble. Remember what the man said his name was? "Legion." What was the chief unit of the Roman army called? "A Legion." Could it be the man realized he had become a substitute for the hatred of his fellow citizens?

But, I suspect, it goes deeper than that. Have you ever noticed that it is human nature to want to be on top? We bolster insecure egos when we put others down and make fun of them. It's our way of compensating for feelings of insecurity we have about ourselves. The Gerasene demoniac served a very useful purpose in that community – he was the town's emotional whipping boy. So, the crowd begs Jesus to leave.

And did you notice what Jesus did? He gets into the boat and goes away. Jesus had shown the extent of his power over evil by transforming a raving maniac into a normal human being. Why couldn't the crowd, instead of begging him to leave, have said to him: "Master, just as you restored this man to his right mind, reclothe us in our rightful minds. Help us out of this unhealthy pattern of hating and fearing others because we see in them the very things we hate and fear in ourselves." Why couldn't they say that? Because, it is easier to live in fear, which is familiar, than to live in faith, which brings in the new and the unfamiliar.

But once again, notice what Jesus does in this story, for it is instructive. In leaving the Gentiles, Jesus does not slam the door on them. He does not exclude them from the Good News of the coming Kingdom. The man he has healed begs to go with him, but Jesus calls him to a new vocation. He tells him to return to his home, and to "declare how much God has done for you." His life now has a new purpose. Under Jesus direct instructions, the Gerasene demoniac becomes the first missionary to the Gentiles, according to Luke's account. He becomes, in essence, the symbol for all Christians who seek to follow this Master, who are called to go home, live their lives, and witness to the life-power of the Gospel in their lives among their families, friends and neighbors.

Don't you see, we know this man. He is the Pee Wee of my teens; the town drunk we've learned to ignore; the woman caught in adultery we've scorned; the geek we've ridiculed; the gay we so fear; the outcast we so very much despise. But maybe Jesus has gotten to them and we need to hear their message. Maybe if we can put aside our fears and our hatreds and our prejudices and can befriend them, they would have something to teach us about forgiveness and new life.

Yes, we know him, and maybe we've ignored him too long feeling it is safer to live in fear than to trust in faith.

Otto remembers awakening and wanting to live for the first time in years. He remembers the paramedics cutting away his motorcycle boot. He remembers waking under white, hot operating room lights with masked, green faces staring at

him. But what he vividly recalls is the tingling sensation where his leg used to be beneath the blanket of white bandages.

Otto Otterpohl had lost his left leg in a motorcycle accident at age 28. Fourteen years later he sighed, "I owe my life to somebody who didn't even know me."

That somebody was a 23-year old highway patrolman named Mike King. Mike did it because the drunken, young Otto, "was a human being, a human life." Otto had been tortured by the demon of drinking with all its denial and self-deception. The whole town knew he was a drunk and a no-good.

The outcome of this true story is a proclamation of what happens when someone is delivered from his or her demons. Otto has found a new career in community relations for a company that manufactures artificial limbs. He counsels amputees with a compassion born of experience. Otto emerged from demonic, personal darkness and he's now empowering others because of what one young man had done for him in his moment of need.

I hope I have the chance, if not in this life, then in the next, to ask Pee Wee to forgive me. I've already asked that of my God. I've also asked God to open my heart to all the other Pee Wee's, the Gerasene demoniac's, the outcast's, that I might come across in this life, and to ask that question that could bring new life to them, to me and to others - "What Would Jesus Do?"

AMEN.

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