

Howard Thurman was a 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, poet, mystic, and Civil Rights leader. Thurman's radical theology of nonviolence influenced the entire movement. His book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* had an enormous influence on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In that book, he identifies the core analysis of Jesus is that we are all children of God. This seemingly simple idea has immense implications, giving courage, fearlessness, and power to the oppressed. At its inception, Christianity was a freedom movement, giving the marginalized and demonized a dignity they couldn't find elsewhere. Christianity wasn't so much a set of doctrines as it was a new way of being human in which the old divisions of race, class, and gender fall, for we are all children of God as Paul says in Galatians.

After a long Easter season, today, we return to the Gospel of Luke. In Luke, we see that Jesus is continually expanding our understanding of who is welcome at God's Table. Jesus' first public words in Luke are when he quotes the prophet Isaiah, saying "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The rest of the Gospel of Luke is Jesus putting these words into action.

In today's reading, Jesus and the disciples sail to the Gerasenes' land, which is Gentile country. Nearly all of Jesus' ministry is to the Jewish people of Israel. It's not until we read Luke's sequel, the book of Acts, that we see the inclusion of the Gentiles, but today Jesus gives us a sneak peak of what's to come. As soon as Jesus gets out the boat, a man approaches him who had been possessed by demons. He lives amongst the tombs, naked, homeless—alive but surrounded by death. Luke tells us he was bound in chains and kept under guard, until the man would break the chains and flee into the wilderness. Whatever we may think of demon possession, this man was not living his best life. He was unwell and presumably dangerous. At least people thought he was.

This demonized man sees Jesus and begs him to not torture him, which is itself fascinating. The demons recognize Jesus has power, and power to them must mean violence, so they beg don't torture us. Jesus orders the unclean spirit to leave the man, and asks, "What is your name?" "Legion," the man replies, for we are many. This is really interesting and may be a symbolic reference to the Roman occupying forces, whose legion's standard had a picture of a wild boar on it, kind of like a pig. Does this man embody the consequence of Rome's occupation in Israel? Does the peace of Rome come at the cost of demonization and bondage? Because like the demons, Rome only understands power through violence.

The legion asks Jesus not to be sent into the abyss and instead begs to be sent into a herd of pigs. Now if we read story in literal terms, we might wonder why Jesus would allow the demons to go into these poor little pigs? In fact, in Bertrand Russell's famous essay "Why I Am Not a Christian," he cites this story as an example of Jesus' imperfect moral character, but I think this misses the point. This story is filled with references to the Roman Army whose banner was a wild boar. By sending the demons in into the pigs, this story illustrates how Jesus will finally exorcise the oppressive Roman empire. The Romans project will eventually self-destruct. Jesus doesn't destroy the demons, or the pigs. They destroy themselves. This is key. Evil is not something that is destroyed with violent force—that's the way of empires, and the way of our world, but it's not the Jesus way. For Jesus, evil destroys itself in the face of non-violent love. Jesus' death exposes the impotence of Rome's violent rule and shows us a new way to be

human in which evil is overcome not with violence but with self-sacrificial love. That's where the entire Jesus story is headed, and this encounter portends what is to come.

Jesus heals this demonized man, and the people from the surrounding town come to see what's happened. They find him dressed, sitting at Jesus' feet like a disciple, and in his right mind. How do you think they would respond to this? Shouldn't they be grateful? Jesus just healed the person they could not. Isn't that something to celebrate? Yet Luke tells us they beg Jesus to leave because they were afraid. In fact, they were overcome with fear. Why were they so afraid? Theologian James Allison asks about this man's chains, wondering who chained him up? Wasn't it these people who did it to protect themselves? Were they worried that now that he was in his right mind, he wouldn't appreciate how they treated him? And here's the most interesting question: was he chained because he had all these demons, or did he have these demons because he was chained?

We live in a world with many people in chains. This morning in America there are 200 million people in our jails and prisons, a 500% increase in my lifetime, far more than any other country on earth. However, we got here, we know a thing or two about putting people in chains, both in our country's past and in our present. Every culture has scapegoats, those we demonize so that we don't have to look at the demons we carry within ourselves. Today is Juneteenth, the longest running African-American holiday in our country, celebrating General Order 3 issued by General Gordon Granger on June 19, 1865 proclaiming freedom to the enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The order stated that, "all slaves are free." Kinda sounds like the words of Jesus, doesn't it, that he has come to proclaim release to the prisoners?

At its inception, Christianity was a non-violent liberation movement for people who were under the oppression of the Roman Empire. The early Christians boldly proclaimed that everyone is a child of God, and children of God have a dignity that no one can take away. For the first three hundred years, the Jesus movement welcomed men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free around a single table, refusing to reinforce the Roman cultural caste system. But when Christianity became wedded to the Empire under Emperor Constantine, we became less a force of liberation and more a force of assimilation.

But the Spirit of God which is the Spirit of liberation cannot be coopted forever, and throughout church history renewal sprung up, not surprisingly among the demonized. It was the enslaved on America's plantations who discovered in Jesus someone who affirmed their inherent dignity. The Abolitionists and the Civil Rights Movement understood Jesus' radical message of human dignity, freeing the enslaved and liberating the oppressed. And in our time, the Spirit is still at work, bringing freedom not through force but through non-violent love. To be a part of this work can be scary. How do you have dinner with those you've previously put in chains? It's easier to just keep things the way they are, to not stir things up. That's why the crowd asked Jesus to leave, and that's why the freed man begged Jesus to go with him. But in a surprise ending, Jesus sends the man back to the people who had chained him, saying, "Return home and tell the story of what God has done for you." And he did.

You see, the good news is that Jesus doesn't give up on the fearful crowds who sent him away. They need freedom too, freedom to stop demonizing, freedom from their oppressive past, freedom from the lie that violence makes peace. This is the freedom of the children of God, and Jesus want it for us all. It's in hearing the testimonies of those Christ has set free that

we will be free. When it comes to our sad history with racism and oppression, there can be a tendency to say, “Let’s not rehash all that and just move on.” But Jesus doesn’t tell the freed man to just move on. He instructs him to tell his story to those who put him in chains, which must have taken great courage. I’m sure they didn’t want to hear it, but he told them anyway. Do we have the courage to hear the stories of the demonized that we all might be free?

Christ came to set us free—the poor and the wealthy, the privileged and the oppressed—the table is big enough for us all, for at this table there is forgiveness and mutuality. Here there is neither Jew nor Greek; neither slave nor free; neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.