

Luke 8:26-39

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Recognize, Refuse, Request

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This is one of the scriptures that is tough for some of us modern-day people to identify with. It sounds to me a bit like a scene from a horror movie: a crazed prison escapee, with episodes so violent that he cannot be restrained with chains and shackles, is roaming naked in a cemetery screaming at passersby. Stephen King could work wonders with the setting! But so did Jesus in today's story.

The crazed man has no home, no clothes, no friends, no name. When Jesus asks who he is, the man answers with a number: "Legion," he says, which was a division of around 6,000 Roman soldiers. This is a clue as to the intended meaning of this scripture at the time it was written. Biblical scholars and historians say this, and other words used in the passage, would have made it evident to 1st Century Jews that the demons in this story referred to the Roman Government. The lesson is that the "Way of Jesus" brings freedom from the brutality of the oppressive Empire.

The Roman Empire ruled Israel during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and the Roman Senate appointed Herod as King of Judea in 34 BCE. Herod was known for ambitious building projects, including the massive renovation and expansion of the Jewish holy temple, which he undertook in hopes of gaining approval of the Jewish people he ruled over. He also brought water supply to Jerusalem, built fortresses, and developed new cities. But his projects, his decadent lifestyle, and his lavish gifts to appease Rome, as well as to other dominions, were possible only with hefty taxes of his people. The Jews were required to

pay tribute to Rome, taxes to Herod, tithes to the Temple, offerings to the Priests, and many others. Years of demands from layers of rulers forced families into poverty and led to the downfall of entire communities.

Herod was a tyrannical leader; anger and dissatisfaction were common among the Jews during his reign. During Advent, we are reminded of how Herod ruled when we read scripture about the Slaughter of the Innocents. Macrobius, an ancient Roman author wrote of Herod, “When it was heard that, as part of the slaughter of boys up to two years old, Herod, King of the Jews, had ordered his own son to be killed, he [the Emperor Augustus] remarked, ‘It is better to be Herod’s pig [Gr. Hys] than his son ‘ [Gr. Huios]’”; ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod\\_the\\_Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great)). During his lifetime, Herod ordered the executions of three of his sons, as well as that of his wife. But since he was a Jew, he did not eat pork so his pig would be saved.

This was the environment that Jesus lived and taught in, and these were the oppressive conditions of the Jewish people. Unjust social, political and economic systems tormented the Jews and early Christians. These are the demons that Jesus claimed God had exorcised from the Gerasene man.

How do we apply this to our lives? Those of us sitting here haven’t been oppressed by a tyrannical empire – at least not to a degree comparable to the Jews that this story was written for. We don’t think of ourselves as the oppressors either. Sardis folks are good people! We have an ongoing food drive to support Loaves & Fishes, and the collection bin in the vestibule is routinely filled, donated, and filled again. We’ve been collecting goods for Charlotte’s Migrant Assistance Project for months. We have hundreds of

dollars in coins locked away waiting to be counted and donated to help purchase medications for elderly friends unable to pay for them. Most importantly, we show up for one another in community. We fellowship at mealtimes; we send cards and texts and emails to each other; just last week in our staff meeting we FaceTimed a Sardis friend we haven't seen in a while; we arrange food for families in times of need, and the list could go on.

In today's lection, little attention is given to the townspeople. I think they are the ones that the good people of Sardis can most closely identify with. They pay little attention to the possessed man and his legion of demons as they go about their daily lives. He's invisible to them as long as he stays out of their way. Should he interfere, the people do as needed for their convenience – they bind him with chains and shackles or eject him from the town and banish him to live in the wild and sleep in the tombs.

How often do we, like the townspeople, overlook injustices for our convenience? Kurt Willems, pastor and theologian, says that this is just the reality of empire. "The empire creates the façade of peace and serenity, all the while perpetuating suffering for other parts of the world." (The Roman Empire During the Time of Jesus; Kurt Willems; April 8, 2017).

The consumption, or over-consumption of Americans is a perfect example of this. Our hunger for goods feeds the oppression of many others across the globe. I could go almost any direction with this statement – healthcare, addiction and pharmaceuticals, US foreign policy, fossil fuels and global warming, hunger and poverty, on and on. I'll

stick with just one example, and our culture of convenience has made it virtually impossible not to be culpable: the plight of plastics.

Companies that make and sell single-use plastic products have sold us on the idea that recycling is the answer to plastic pollution. Recycling is good – it helps, but it’s not enough. Less than 10% of plastic waste is recycled (<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/07/plastic-produced-recycling-waste-ocean-trash-debris-environment/>), and the manufacturing demand for recycled plastics is low. Cheap and abundant natural gas have driven the price of new plastics down, while processing costs associated with recycled plastics have driven their prices up.

The United States produces so much plastic waste that we don’t have the ability to manage it ourselves, so we send it to other countries. We ship an average of 550 large shipping containers of plastic waste out every day, and about 430 of those containers, like the ones pulled by semi-trucks, are shipped to developing countries that we know have high levels of waste mismanagement. These countries have inexpensive labor (often child labor), no health or safety standards, few environmental regulations, and no guarantee that the plastic waste will actually be recycled. “Plastic waste has been exported and counted as ‘recycled’ by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the waste and recycling industry for decades,” (<https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/pft/2019/3/6/157000-shipping-containers-of-us-plastic-waste-exported-to-countries-with-poor-waste-management-in-2018>). We have no official measures in place to track what happens to plastic waste once it reaches foreign soil. In Vietnam, “more than half of the plastic imported into the country is sold on to ‘craft villages’, where it is processed informally, mainly on a household scale.

Informal processing involves washing and melting the plastic, which uses a lot of water and energy and produces a lot of toxic smoke. The untreated water is discharged to waterways and around 20% of the plastic is unusable so it is dumped and usually burnt, creating further litter and air quality problems,” (<https://theconversation.com/heres-what-happens-to-our-plastic-recycling-when-it-goes-offshore-110356>).

So what is Jesus telling us to do in this scripture? There are no commands about single-use plastics in the Bible, so let's look again at the townspeople. They showed no joy and shared no gratitude for the healing of their compatriot. Instead, they were afraid and angry at the loss of the large herd of swine. The economic impact of the exorcism would be devastating. For them, living with the demons was easier than following the way of Jesus, so they begged him to leave.

I think Jesus calls us to recognize that we tend to distance ourselves from the demons within, attributing evil instead to others. We often fail to look at our part. It's easy to point fingers! And sometimes we participate in evil behaviors without even having a clue that it's evil we're doing – like drinking from disposable plastic straws or carrying our groceries in disposable plastic bags. Do more than reduce, reuse and recycle, also recognize your complicity in oppressive systems, then refuse to participate. Finally, don't run Jesus away like to townspeople, instead request that he stay. Amen.