“WHAT IS YOUR NAME?”

Luke 8:26–39

Key Verse: 8:30a

“Jesus then asked him, ‘What is your name?’”

Do you like labels? Not things on packages, but labels people give each other. We hate to be labeled. But we do it to others to give ourselves a quick reference point on how to think about them. This person is a jock, that one, a nerd, the other, a social butterfly. Sometimes we let others define us. We can even label ourselves, thinking what defines us is our race or national origin, gender or talents, career or achievements. We take a bit of everything and synthesize it all into something like a personal identity. Still it doesn’t seem to be enough. Who am I, really? In today’s passage Jesus encounters a man, and in the many components of the story he asks him, “What is your name?” Some people may even think, “Who cares about his name? Why bother with such a question?” We want to think about why Jesus asks this question. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

Look at verse 26. “Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.” Where is this place? First of all, the body of water is the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Lake of Gennesaret or the Sea of Tiberias (Lk5:1; Jn6:1; 21:1). Last week we saw how Jesus got into a boat with his disciples to sail “to the other side” (8:22). But it wasn’t like going across the middle of the lake, but more like at the northeast corner. “The country of the Gerasenes” refers to a region on the eastern shore. It was part of an area also known as the Decapolis, or Ten Cities (Mk5:20). Many Gentiles had settled there since the time of Alexander the Great. Few Jews lived there because they considered Gentiles “unclean” (Ac10:14,28). In fact, several details in this passage highlight that this is an “unclean” place. It’s near the seashore where there are “tombs,” which Jews considered “unclean” (27b). The spirit in the man is called “unclean” (29). “Pigs” were “unclean” animals (32a; Lev11:7). So it’s surprising that Jesus goes here. Three cities nearby had similar names: Gerasa, Gadara, and Gergesa. (The word “city” is in verses 27,34 and 39). It’s most likely the “city” of Gergesa, now called El Koursi, near the eastern shore of the lake where there are also hills and a steep bank (which are mentioned in verses 32,33).

Look at verse 27. “When Jesus had stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs.” What a scary encounter! A naked, demon-possessed man who’d been living for a long time in a graveyard. Dirty, and very wild. All we know about him is that he used to live in the city. And it gets scarier. Look at verse 28. “When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, ‘What do you have to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.’” Well good morning! What a greeting! Crying out with a loud voice. Talking about torment. What’s going on? Look at verse 29a. “For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man.” Even before the man cries out, Jesus did this. In fact, it’s what caused the man to cry out. This man has never met Jesus before, but knows exactly who he is. He’s also talking about torment. These details show that it’s the demon who’s talking, not the man. The demon is in control of him.

Demon-possession is a heavy topic. Rationalistic people dismiss it as superstitious; they say it’s really mental illness. But people who work with the mentally ill also see cases that seem beyond a psychiatric issue. We see it in other details here. Look at verse 29b. “(For many a time it had seized him. He was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert.)” It’s describing a power that’s beyond human strength. The Bible tells us that there is a material and physical world, but there’s also a spiritual world, with the Holy Spirit’s presence, and, both angels and demons (cf. Ac23:8; Eph6:11–12). It’s not an anti-intellectual belief. Luke, a medical doctor, using the best Greek vocabulary, grammar and style, mentions angels[[1]](#footnote-1) and demons[[2]](#footnote-2) more than the other Gospel writers. As we believe in God, we also need to be aware that demons are real (cf. Jas2:19). But we can’t but wonder, what causes demon-possession? There’s no easy answer. But generally, it seems demons come into a person who leaves the door open. When we’re too curious about things we know are wrong, when we become too proud or want to rebel against everything, we leave ourselves vulnerable to their influence. Once they come in, they take over. They drive us away from other people. They make us angry, fearful, violent and tormented. They make us doubt that anyone would love us, even God. They also make us “unclean,” meaning they cause us to become obsessed with unclean things. They make it seem like we’re beyond help, beyond hope. It’s frightening.

The man is yelling at Jesus with a loud voice. And how does Jesus respond? Look at verse 30a. “Jesus then asked him, ‘What is your name?’” It’s such a quiet, polite, gentle thing to say, that it’s almost hard to catch at first how profound it is. Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to come out, but he speaks so kindly to the man. He doesn’t look much like a man anymore, but Jesus treats him with respect and dignity as a human being created in the image of God. It’s a great example of de-escalation. More than that, it shows us such love and such hope. Jesus wants to bring this demon-possessed man back to himself. He wants him to know his real identity is not in this experience, but in his own soul.

In the Bible, a person’s name has great significance. It symbolizes their personality, identity and character. God is the Great Individual, and of all his creation, human beings, made in his image, also have an individual and unique identity. It’s what gives our lives absolute value as well. But identity can seem so abstract, so complex. People try to tell us who we are. Or we try to create an identity for ourselves. It’s more than just a name. When Jesus asks this question, he’s actually saying, “Who are you?” It’s is a huge life question, and so many people are really struggling with it. We want to find our identity apart from our parents, apart from who society tries to make us into. It’s way more than just reiterating the birth name our parents or guardians gave us. Around the world many people go on what’s called an “identity quest.” Through interaction with a wide variety of people or places apart from what’s familiar to them, or through complete solitude, they try to find out who they are. Many look deep within but only fall into confusion and despair.

What’s the answer? How do we know who we are, our “true self”? This incident suggests a few things. First of all, the man is not the demons within him. He’s not the evil that’s trying to destroy him; he’s God’s good creation, worth saving. So we’re not really our sins or failures or bad experiences; we’re God’s own sons and daughters. We’re not trouble-makers or social deviants who should be locked up. We’re individuals whom God values so highly. It suggests that we find our real identity in God, in who God made us to be, in how much he values us, and ultimately, in his love. His great love for us satisfies our souls and gives us deep peace, inner security and a healthy sense of self that erases our nervous desperation. We can know it’s true only when we experience it.

The man’s initial response is discouraging. Look at verse 30b. He says his name is “Legion.” It was a word used for 6,000 soldiers in the Roman army. The man is saying he’s a legion of demons, way beyond help or hope. Look at verse 31. “And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss.” They’re so smart. Though Jesus is speaking kindly to the man, they know he’s about to kick them all out, and that their end is destruction. Some people misunderstand that Jesus has to bargain with them. But that’s not at all the case. We may not totally understand, but it’s clear that the end of all demons is eternal torment where they can no longer challenge God or disturb or ruin any human being anymore. Jesus could do anything, but what does he do? Look at verse 32. “Now a large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them permission.” In his sovereign will Jesus allowed these demons to enter the herd of pigs. Why would he do that? Pigs are also God’s creation. This herd of pigs certainly is valuable to the townspeople who own them and hope to profit from them. But here, the man, though disturbed and disturbing, is even more valuable. This seems to be the point Jesus wants to make. And what happens? Look at verse 33. “Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned.” Today, one whole pig costs about $1,000. Mark’s Gospel tells us there were 2,000 of them (Mk5:13). So this was an instant destruction of $2 million, for healing just one troublemaker. It seems too much.

And this story still resonates today. In our materialistic culture people regard money and possessions as so important. It’s virtually on the level of worship. Disturbed people, on the other hand, are treated as if they don’t exist. They’re ignored, neglected, swept out of sight. Nobody wants to spend any money on them to help them get well. If anything at all is done for them, they’re given drugs, like modern chains and shackles, to control them from harming themselves or others. They’re seen as a nuisance or a threat. People want to get as far away from them as possible. But Jesus seems to go to this place because he wants to meet and help this man. It’s moving, but it’s also challenging. To minister to disturbed people today, not only do we need to treat them with respect and love, but also we need courage. We need the courage to take a risk, to make a real sacrifice to bring them back to God.

How does it end? Look at verses 34–36. It seems they all remembered that man. They looked at their dead pigs floating in the water, and then at the man all healed, and they got scared. Then the herdsmen explain how the man was healed. And what do the people do? Look at verse 37. What are they so afraid of? Of course, in one sense, they’re afraid of the tremendous power of Jesus. Not only could he calm the stormy sea, but also he could drive so many demons out of one man. But the real source of their fear seems to be how much more Jesus may ask them to sacrifice for other disturbed people. They’ve had enough. They’re not even happy for the man. And what does Jesus do? He doesn’t stay where he’s not wanted. He leaves. And then the healed man is a sharp contrast. The people ask Jesus to depart, but the man begs to be with Jesus. He’s found his true shepherd. He wants to enjoy his love and friendship. And how does Jesus respond? Look at verse 38b. Jesus sends him away, saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” It seems a bit cold. But this was the best way to help him. It not only would deepen the man’s gratitude, by telling his story over and over again, but it also would help these people whose hearts had become so hard.

Read verse 30a again. May God help us personally experience the great love of Jesus so that we can find out who we really are. And may he teach us practically how to value and treat people the way he did.

1. (1:11,13,18,19,26,30,34, 35,38; 2:9,10,13,15,22; 4:10; 9:26; 12:8; 15:10; 16:22; 20:36; 22:43; 24:23; cf. Ac5:19; 6:15; 7:30,35,38,53; 8:26; 10:3,7,22; 11:13; 12:7–11,15,23; 23:8­–9; 27:23) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (4:33,35,41; 7:33; 8:2,26–27,29­–30,33,35–36,38; 9:1,42,49; 10:17; 11:18–20; 13:32) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)