**Denouncing Demonic Forces**

Lent V March 17, 2024

Luke 8: 26-39 Russell Mitchell-Walker

I was in Alberta late January supporting my mom who was recovering from a TIA, a minor stroke and couldn’t drive. One of the benefits of being on sabbatical was having the flexibility which made it easy to decide to go help her and my sister out for a week. While I was there Premier Danielle Smith announced a suite of policies that target and limit the rights of trans Albertans in multiple areas of life, including seeking medical treatments, participating in athletics, and whether one can use preferred pronouns and names in school. It is another step in a series of moves by provincial governments, including here in Saskatchewan to limit the rights of 2SLGBTQ+ folk, especially transgender and non-binary individuals, which diminish their humanity and demonizes them, increasing acts and incidents of hate in our communities. This week we marked National Affirming PIE Day across the United Church and we celebrate it today with Pie sales after church and proceeds going to Lulu Lodge, for houseless youth in Regina. PIE day is a day where we celebrate the standards of being Public, Intentional, and Explicit in our welcome and work toward being Affirming, welcoming and inclusive people and communities. With these anti-2SLGBTQ+ policies being developed and movements growing it is more important than ever to be public, intentional and explicit in our support. These movements toward limiting rights and dehumanizing people could be considered demonic and evil which we need to be liberated from.

That is what some believe our scripture story is about today. In the story Jesus confronts the demons possessing a man, who is naked and in chains as a result of the possession, and sends the demons into a herd of pigs, hurling themselves over a cliff into the sea. This takes place in area of the Gerasenes which is a gentile area, hence raising pigs. Author and historian [Diana Butler Bass](https://progressivechristianity.org/resource/the-demons-of-empire/) writes that there was also another Gerasa where there had been a brutal Roman attack. She indicates then, that the writer is wanting to make a political link between that, and Jesus’ story. The demon is named ‘Legion’ which is the name for a large division of Roman soldiers. So sending a legion of so called demons into a herd of pigs (which is what roman soldiers ate) that drown in the sea, theologian Ched Meyers says, “brings to mind the narrative of Israel’s liberation from Egypt” when the Egyptian soldiers were swallowed up by the Red Sea, freeing the Israelites from Slavery. Theologian and Biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan names this story as openly mocking “Roman imperialism as demonic possession” and reveals what colonial domination does to those it subjects to human cruelty.

While there is skepticism among biblical scholars that this is a historical story, it is important all the same. All of this would have been a strong message of hope to the readers and listeners of the time, that Jesus supports the liberation of the people from Roman imperialism and oppression. They were the demonic influences of their time. What are those influences in our time?

As I proposed earlier, the movement creating anti-trans policies and limiting rights could be considered demonic. As we face these movements and efforts, it is more important than ever for us to be public, intentional and explicitly in our support and welcome of 2SLGBT+ folk, as we have been this past year in being present at protests and speaking out publicly. During my time away, a new organization, the Interfaith Queer Coalition formed to “reclaim the religious voice from those who have sought to weaponize faith”. The Coalition will work to address the hate that we are experiencing and have started with creating an [Open Letter](https://affirmingconnections.com/interfaith-coalition) of support which all allies and queer folk are encouraged to sign. You can find the link in our [Weekly Wander](https://mailchi.mp/dc50f3a6a137/service-this-sunday-and-many-events-coming-soon-6360092?fbclid=IwAR3PjZdrq7uCmPqEX8aIViJtuM76VMworESzVrBwPZ-RUp7Z8X0atLiHXFc) newsletter.

As an Affirming Ministry, we intentionally work toward welcoming all. This includes the poor – our Affirming Ministry Statement includes ‘economic circumstance. Another possible area of demonic forces is the oppression of the poor and unhoused in our society. There are systems that work against supporting those in need. The fact that we as churches and community members (including agencies) had to work to establish warming centre, that the City had no cold weather strategy and that it took well into the winter(late January) to get the funding and be able to open the warming centre, are all indications that the systems are resistant to making the changes needed to make the lives of the most vulnerable easier. During my sabbatical time, as this was part of my focus I witnessed not only this but also the resilience and caring community of the poor and unhoused.

One of the best places I spent time at was Queen City Wellness Pharmacy, because they had a coffee counter where people could drop by get coffee and sit at the counter or at tables to visit and hang out. I was often behind the counter and could chat and get to know folk who came by regularly. On my first day there, one woman looked at me and said “Are you a priest?” I laughed and said ‘no, but I am a minister, how did you know?” She said, I just could sense the good in you. I told her I am glad because it could have been something very different or worse! Her and I chatted regularly after that.

Shylo Stevenson is the Addictions Support Staff at the Wellness Pharmacy and was my main contact. He would invite me to go with him to Pine Lodge an addiction treatment centre where he did a wellbriety session based on the 12 steps from an Indigenous perspective. I was at the Friendship Centre when word was received that the Province, the Saskatchewan Heath Authority was terminating the supplies for safe drug use as part of the existing harm reduction program we did have. This means that agencies now have to purchase their own supplies to provide to clients so they are not reusing contaminated pipes or needles when they smoke or use drugs. While the ideal is to encourage people to recovery, harm reduction saves lives and builds relationships to help people when they are ready for treatment. It cannot be forced. This is what the government does not seem to understand. Shylo invited me to join him and another colleague for a meeting with Tim McLeod, Minister for Mental Health and Addictions to talk about these changes and their new policy. At the meeting we learned that their focus is on recovery and what the news media did not report, according to him, was that they are opening up more beds and facilities for treatment and increasing available funding. One thing that stuck with me that the minister said, was something like ‘I care too much for people to let them use drugs. We need to get them into recovery’. That is all well and good, except that people need to be ready for treatment and in the meantime, without safe and clean supplies they will be dying and have increased rates of HIV (we are already have the highest rates in the country) and Hepatitis C. Shylo spoke about a land based indigenous treatment program he is working on establishing that emphasizes reclaiming culture and healing through teachings and ceremony. He has invited me to be part of an initial planning meeting as I may be able to help them secure a land base through church connections. The minister was very interested in this program and the next week emailed to encourage them to put in an application for funding.

Finally I wish to share the experience I had in meeting and getting to know some of the people who are houseless. In general I was struck by their gratitude and overall friendliness when receiving coffee and a snack or a meal. Often when I asked them how they were doing, they were pleasant and positive, even if they just came in from outside where it was -20 or more, and were probably out there for a long time, given that most have to walk everywhere they go. I have heard a lot in the last year or so about the importance of mutual aid, not just charity, where we build relationships and support goes both ways. I witnessed this at the Wellness Centre. Another smaller warming centre had opened by a new organization, called The Hawk Principle Co-op, established largely by those who have been working on the front lines, offering overnight outreach, supporting the houseless on the streets. This centre is called The Lodge and they secured a small space and are operating with very limited resources, as well as with very few rules for the guests who come in off the street. Two houseless folk, one known as **Crazy Horse**, and his friend, one day were trying to rent a van so they could go around and do a bottle drive to raise money for The Lodge, because they knew they were struggling financially. It was quite heartwarming to see this.

For me this was God’s love in action, where we might least expect it. Working toward liberation of the demons that can hinder us from living full and healthy lives. Mutual Aid, is a part of this liberation. Standing with and in solidarity with those in need, working together to address the issues and make the world a better place, is what working toward the kingdom of God here on earth is about. May we be open to seeing the beauty and love in those who too often our society may demonize or reject. May we continue to be Public, Intentional, and Explicit and our ministry to include and welcome all. May we all denounce where and when demonic forces control and enslave ourselves and others, and work toward liberation from these forces. May it be so.