

Those of you who enjoy good mystery stories are probably familiar with the literary device known as the “red herring”, those clues the author or storyteller intentionally uses to distract you from figuring out who really committed the crime. Red herrings usually work because they take advantage of what we think we already know, things like stereotypes and assumptions. They also are pretty entertaining, which is why we eagerly follow them down the wrong path.

Red herrings also exist outside of literature and storytelling. We can encounter them rhetorically in arguments and discussions when they are introduced as logical fallacy. These red herrings play on fears of scarcity of resources or fears of the unknown to make arguments sound relevant but in reality, they aren't. An example might be the argument for making academic requirements more rigorous in an institution of higher learning because faculty are afraid of losing their jobs during a budget crisis. There is no real connection between academic rigor and a budget crisis, but fear is a strong motivator to follow that red herring instead of addressing the reason or reasons behind budget issues. It might sound logical but is still a distraction. You can probably think of many other examples.

This type of red herring isn't always intentional, and usually has more to do with the persons involved in the conversation than with the issue at hand. Sometimes using red herrings as logical fallacy is intentional, especially if someone wants to feel more important in a conversation or introduce their issue, or if they are uncomfortable with the direction or subject of the conversation.

Which leads us to today's Gospel where Jesus has a conversation with some demons and ultimately heals the man they tormented. This is an important story because it reveals a lot about Jesus, who Jesus is, what Jesus came to do, and how Jesus leaves us. But it is also a story that can be .... well ... offensive to our modern intellect and sensitivities, making it easy for us to follow the temptations of red herrings when it comes to interpreting this Gospel encounter.

One red herring we people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is quick to follow is our intellectual and scientific superiority over people who lived in Jesus' day. It can be tempting to look down on them as “primitive” and dismiss much of this story by saying there is no such thing as demons and diagnose the man ourselves as suffering from some form of mental illness. This is a harmful interpretation that can cause damage by being demeaning and dismissive of those struggling with mental illness and dehumanizes mental illness by equating it with evil. This

interpretation ignores the fact that wellness of body and mind and spirit is a continuum and every single one of us will have some issues with our own mental wellness some time in our lives. This is normal and completely natural. Mental illness is not the same thing as demon possession. Sometimes following red herrings can be harmful.

So, let's try to not cause any harm and take a closer look at what the text says instead of avoiding what might make us uncomfortable by following red herrings. A fair amount of space in today's Gospel is given to a conversation Jesus has with the demons, not the man they tormented. Notice the demons called Jesus by name. They recognized him, they knew who he is and were afraid of him. They begged him not to send them back to where they came from. The word used is abyss, indicating they came from another world or another dimension. This is another word we struggle with because it isn't scientific or exact. It alludes to a mystery, not the kind we solve, the kind that reveals there is more to the world than we can ever fully know or understand. The conversation also reveals these demons recognized Jesus had power over them and had the ability to destroy them.

All of this is important because if we skip over this part of the Gospel, or ignore it because it seems like science fiction, we will miss something important about Jesus. Jesus is more than a nice man who told people to love each other. Jesus is more than a wise teacher whose use of parables is masterful. Jesus has more power than the violence of flipping tables over in the temple. Jesus doesn't bring us more of the oppression and harm that seems all too familiar in the world. Jesus brings us the liberation of God's healing and renewing love that will ultimately restore the world to God's kingdom. Jesus has a power we can't understand, the kind that makes evil tremble, the kind of power that defeated death itself, freeing us from oppression from sin and death and invites us into the power we usually call resurrection life. This is a Jesus we can't label or contain with a word or stereotype that makes us comfortable. But we can watch him, we can listen to him, we can follow him, and we can believe, even when he does things we don't understand, like talk to demons.

Demons are not that unusual. They appear in literature and stories in pretty much every culture. They are an embodiment of evil, evil that is also difficult to understand. Evil is extreme, it is beyond selfishness and different from sin. Evil is harming someone or something for the sake of the harm; evil thoroughly enjoys watching the suffering harm produces. Evil produces non-redemptive suffering, the kind that keeps people trapped in abusive and oppressive situations with no hope of change or relief. This is why slavery is evil - because it harms everyone involved with it.

Demon possession might be used to describe when someone obsesses over an influence so extremely harmful and negative it causes them to shut out any other influence in their lives, especially those that seek forgiveness and healing. This is something extreme, something beyond what we can handle. We heard in today's Gospel the people in the city had tried to contain the man who was possessed but their methods could not hold him, let alone stop him from harming himself or isolating himself. This is also hard for us to hear. Sometimes there are situations beyond our control; even when we want to help, we can't.

That is why this is a wonderful story of hope. Because what the people of the town could not do, Jesus did. Only Jesus had power over the demons. That Jesus sent the demons into pigs which ultimately led to economic loss for the community might be the author of Luke's Gospel commenting on how the economy, no matter how much trust we put into it or rely on it, is not as powerful as Jesus.

Which brings us to the fear mentioned in today's Gospel. Twice we heard the people who lived in the city, the people who had tried to contain the possessed man and failed, were afraid when they saw Jesus and heard what he had done. He had healed a man at the expense of their livelihood. Instead of facing the truth that God was in the middle of their economic crisis, and therefore presenting an opportunity to change and grow and learn, they rejected the opportunity to engage with Jesus by asking him to go away.

Understandably, the healed man wanted to go with Jesus. But Jesus sent him home to tell his story of what God had done for him. We don't know if the man found what we call success or acceptance in his community, just that he did what Jesus told him to do.

When we aren't tempted to follow the red herrings of logical fallacy by ignoring the uncomfortable parts of this story, we might recognize the crises in our world today are the places we might also find the healing hope of resurrection life. Not by name calling or demonizing or following those red herrings of blame, anger, vengeance, and the fallacy of our superiority, but by looking to Jesus. I know it might sound lame, but sometimes we grow when we first acknowledge there are things beyond our control. That is not easy to do. It wasn't easy for the people in the town in today's Gospel, and while it is not easy, it is only the first step to following Jesus by admitting there is more to the world than we can ever fully understand. Following Jesus means letting Jesus be Jesus not who we want him to be. This means letting Jesus talk to demons when we would rather rationalize that word away. And it means realizing if we allow Jesus to eradicate evil from the world, it may mean some of the things we depend on,

like our economy, might be upended. And that will be really uncomfortable. Even the idea of it can make some people feel afraid, so much so they get angry and obsess over what they might lose.

That's probably why groups like the KKK are said to be growing, why women, especially women of color, are still waiting for equal opportunity, equal pay, equal rights, and equal access to medical care, and might be the reason why gun violence is becoming too common.

In the face of all this suffering - especially as so many of us are still processing the latest act of gun violence that happened in an Episcopal Church in Alabama on Friday - what can we do? That's in today's Gospel too. We do what Jesus said, we tell of what God has done for us. We grieve, because grief is part of love, the kind of love that is God. We pray because that is how we converse with God and listen to God. We keep filling up that little sharing cabinet with whatever food we can because we believe that is one way to show we see needs and are doing what we can to ease them. We can show support for pride month and Juneteenth, which happens to be today, the day we recognize when the last people held in slavery were set free as it took a couple years for the news of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation to reach the entire country. These celebrations are not intended to hurt anyone, instead they are attempts to make room for God's Kingdom by inviting everyone to celebrate together and experience joy in God's liberating love for us all. If there is one thing that evil cannot stand, it is joy. Not unbridled happiness - which is only another red herring -- but joy that recognizes and celebrates God's healing, forgiving, liberating beautiful, and powerful love present in the world and in us, especially when we share it by telling how God is active in our lives.