

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

June 22, 2025

Social Isolation

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have preached on this before...humanity's penchant for our well-worn paths of judgement and self-righteousness. But it comes out with a slightly different flavor in our Gospel text today, and it's worth exploring more. Exploring the well-worn paths of labeling others and then ignoring them. Well-worn paths of complacency and judgement. Well-worn paths of exclusion and isolation.

We love to judge those around us, reduce their entire identity to the judgement we've made about them, then move along with our lives, completely ignoring our call to love and serve THAT NEIGHBOR. Here, opposite Galilee, Jesus meets a man from the city of the Gerasenes. He is known to not wear clothes and he lived in the tombs. Somehow, he recognizes Jesus. And even more, Jesus asks him his name.

Each of us has a name. Whether we were given a name that has significance in our family of origin, or we chose a new name ourselves, names are powerful. But when Jesus asks his name, he responds, "Legion." The narrator editorializes, "for many demons had entered him." We do not know if this is his real name, or the name that the people call him in the community. Can you hear it?

"There goes old Legion, be careful around him." "Hear that howling from the cemetery? Probably ol' Legion." "Oh no, here's come Legion, he's probably

looking for money or food.” “Legion is always causing some trouble.” These are just a few of the statements I can imagine the Gerasenes making. And I can imagine them easily because I have seen the same, very human and very broken, attitude around today.

What do you think it does to a person’s spirit to be known as their condition? How might the constant reminder of one’s strangeness-to-others impact their sense of identity? Here, we have a case of chicken and egg. Which came first, the exclusion from community, or the “demonic” possession?

Professor of psychology and neuroscience Julianne Holt-Lunstad argues that “being connected to others socially is widely considered a fundamental human need—crucial to both well-being and survival.” To add more challenge, the American Psychological Association notes that “loneliness is not synonymous with chosen isolation or solitude. Rather, loneliness is defined by people’s levels of satisfaction with their connectedness, or their perceived social isolation.” Being known as the man who lives “not in a house but in the tombs” and doesn’t dress as others do can create a social isolation that shapes one’s mental, spiritual, and physical health.

I don’t have an answer for you by the way; which came first, the isolation or the demon possession. The text doesn’t tell us how he came to be demon-possessed, just that it’s something he had been dealing with for “a long time.” We also don’t get to hear how this man’s neighbors reacted to his being made whole.

Do you think it was easy for that man’s neighbors to go back to calling him by his name? Do you think they were nervous that he’d slip into his “old ways” again? Do you think they welcomed him back into community after years and years? Do you think they were even happy for him when he was made whole?

Some were glad, I'm sure. But most of his neighbors? I don't know. We humans love to look down on someone, don't we? And when that someone is suddenly someone we can no longer look down on....well, that can make us upset. We get awfully used to reducing others to labels and denying their full humanity.

This reductionist attitude seems to crop up a lot in American society if you look for it. Recent layoffs have illustrated how corporate leadership generally views employees, the people who actually produce things and create value, as little more than numbers in spread sheets. Many of these layoffs were determined entirely by algorithms and data points. It has become quite easy to ignore the humanity of the people around us and reduce them to less than the whole beings that they are.

But we know the terrible harm this can do. We see the effects of denying the humanity of others, of isolating and excluding them. When perpetuated long enough it looks like demon possession! It harms the victim, and it also chips away at the humanity of the victimizers too. There is no quicker way to lose one's own humanity than to dehumanize your neighbor. Of course, those dehumanized suffer far worse, often enduring physical, mental, or emotional damage long after the experience. But damage is done to the perpetrator too, as well as to creation at large. Nothing good comes from dehumanizing others. And yet it still happens, and more frequently than we realize.

We are human so long as we can recognize humanity in ourselves and in others. We are human when we recognize that we have needs and that our neighbors may have similar needs too. But once we start to lose that ability, once we become too conditioned to not seeing or acknowledging humanity in others then we begin to lose our own humanity. At that point we are unrighteous, we are no longer living as we were created to live.

Being fully human, pursuing righteousness, makes the world far more complex. It also shows how much humanity, and the world, are interconnected. We are made for community. Sure, we each need different things from that community, but the need remains. And the damage done when we are forcefully excluded, socially isolated, is immense.

We combat this terrible damage by recognizing that the people around us are whole humans, with different needs. Recognizing that are always more than the labels we've assigned them, always more complex than we want to consider. Now, this makes life messy quickly, but it also makes life more true, more abundant, more full. Amen.