

FIFTH
SUNDAY
AFTER
PENTECOST

The Rev.
Jonathan
Myers

Spirit who makes us one in Christ, indwell our hearts with curiosity, wonder, and grace that we might be ones who indwell the world with your love and grace. Amen.
Who was he? Where did he go? What is his story?

These words begin an excerpt from the book by Steve Lopez, *The Soloist*, which also became a 2009 film starring Robert Downy Jr and Jamie Foxx.

Who was he? Where did he go? What is his story?

...His playing is a little scratchy and tentative, but just like before, it's clear this is no beginner. There'd been some serious training in there, somewhere along the way. He doesn't appear to be playing for money, which seems strange for a homeless guy. He plays as if he's a student, oblivious to everyone around him, and this is a practice session.

Strange place to practice. The ground shakes when buses roar by, and his strings are barely audible in the orchestra of horns, trucks and sirens. I gaze at the tops of buildings adorned with gargoyles and grand cornices. Men and women move about, duty-bound, ignoring him for the most part as they disappear around corners and into entryways. The man plays on, a lone fiddler. He throws his head back, closes his eyes, drifts. A portrait of tortured bliss.

"Do you remember me?" I ask.

"I remember your voice."

He's still suspicious of me, suspicious of everything around him, it seems. He says he was trying to remember a Tchaikovsky piece he once knew quite well, but now it is as elusive as the meaning of a dream. It's obvious that he's troubled in some way, like so many others who wander the streets as if they inhabit a different planet than the rest of us, wrapped in many-layered outfits to keep from coming unraveled. He's wearing a ratty blue sweater with a light brown T-shirt over it and the collar of a shirt spilling out over the top of it all. Wrapped around his neck, like a scarf, is a yellow terrycloth towel. His pants hang low on his waist, fitted for a man three sizes bigger, and his grimy white sneakers have no laces.

He's a handsome guy, lean and fit-looking, with a strong jaw and clean white teeth. He reminds me a little of Miles Davis. I ask where he lives and he says at the Midnight Mission, one of the biggest rescue operations on nearby Skid Row. Not inside, he specifies. But on the street, though he showers and takes some meals inside.

"Why not sleep inside?"

"Oh, no," he says. "I wouldn't want to do that."

I wonder how safe it can be for a man trying to reconnect with Tchaikovsky as drug dealers, prostitutes and hustlers work streets teeming with the lame and the afflicted. Skid Row is a dumping ground for inmates released from the nearby county jail, and it's a place where the sirens never stop screaming.

"Maybe I'll come by and visit you at the mission," I tell him.

He nods, but I can see he doesn't trust me. He tucks the violin back under his chin, eager to get back to his music...

Two weeks later, I go looking for him once more and he's disappeared again. I stroll over to the mission at Fourth and Los Angeles streets, where I see street people by the dozens, some of them drug-ravaged, some of them raving mad, some of them lying so still on the pavement it's hard to tell whether they're napping or waiting for a ride to the morgue.

I notice for the first time that his violin, caked with grime and a white chalky substance that looks like a fungus, is missing an important component or two.

"Your violin has only two strings," I say. "You're missing the other two."
Yes, he says. He's well aware.

"All I want to do is play music, and the crisis I'm having is right here. This one's gone," he says of the missing top string, "that one's gone, and this little guy's almost out of commission."

His goal in life is to figure out how to replace the strings. But he got used to playing imperfect instruments while taking music classes in Cleveland's public schools, and there's a lot you can do, he assures me, with just two strings.

I notice while talking to him that someone has scrawled names on the pavement where we're standing. Nathaniel says he did it with a rock. The list includes Babe Ruth, Susan, Nancy, Kevin and Craig.

"Whose names are those?" I ask. Oh, those people, he says. "Those were my classmates at Juilliard."

Jesus crosses over the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gerasenes, which means that he's not just crossing the sea, he's also crossing boundaries. The land of the Gerasene's is the land of Gentiles, and no self-respecting Jewish rabbi would be taking his band of followers there.

As he steps out of the boat, he's confronted immediately by a man who is occupied. This is a man who is not in his right mind. When Jesus asks his name, he says 'Legion.' Legion is not this man's name, and others would know what a Legion was in the first century because in the Roman army "legion" designated 6,000 soldiers. This man is alone, wandering the tombs (a place of utter desolation and uncleanness), and clearly a frightening hazard to himself and to others. He is without clothing and his wrists and ankles are perpetually bruised from the shackles and chains he had to break because people did not know anything else to do, but to bind him.

But Jesus heals him, sending the host of demons to inhabit and drive mad a herd of pigs. As with the name, Legion, a herd of pigs has it's own socio-political symbology. Pigs were not an animal that those related to Judaism would have had any dietary connection to, and to the rest of the folks, there would not have been any economic loss to speak of. So let's be clear, if we had time to unpack this Gospel in a Bible Study, or if this were a Baptist pulpit and I had a good hour to work with, we could really get underneath all of the context to see that this, like many of our Gospel accounts, is about confronting deep seeded sociological, political, economic, and religious realities and injustices.

And likewise, Paul takes us in the same socio-political direction. There is neither Jew or Greek; slave or free; male or female for all are one in Christ. In God's construction of reality all are equal and no one has power over another. No group has the capacity to divide from the collective and bind a person, forcing him or her to live without clothes, shelter, or connection to community.

Jesus, shows us what this movement from possessed or occupied toward wholeness and integration looks like. He shows us what it looks like to go from a world where there is power differentiation between races, genders, occupations, or mental states to one where sanity, integration, inclusion, and equality begin to become the norm.

And how does he do this? He asks a simple question. "What is your name?" (repeat)

When all of the voices have taken over, this question penetrates to the core of our being, silencing all the distracts us from our identity. As I hear Jesus ask this question, I have the image of the old Dawn commercials in my minds eye. A dish sink full of greasy water, and a drop of Dawn soap moves all the grease to the edges of the television screen. It literally cut grease out of the way. Jesus' question forces the man's identity to come to the forefront. It is also Jesus' voice, the voice of God, that this occupy-er, this possessor of human souls remembers and says, "What do you want with me?" and "Do not torment me."

The Soloist is a modern day parable of this same story. Living among the tombs of the streets of LA, a schizophrenic man is befriended by another and given an opportunity to live into his identity as a musician.

My given name is Jonathan. It is a word from the Hebrew Scriptures. It's meaning in Hebrew is "God has given." Another way to say it is, gift. Do I live my identity as a gift given from God? Most of the time, sadly, no I don't. My name is all too often Legion as well. The demons of worry, anxiety, stress, pride, greed, loneliness, self-doubt, cynicism, laziness possess me to the point, that I forget my identity as a child of God...as that image bearer of God. I forget that my identity is love, grace, peace, presence, hope, care, and faithful.

How many of us have forgotten our name? What is the Legion that has occupied our identities as individuals? The demons are too many to name or count. I've named on a few of mine. This man, the demoniac, is completely defined by what assails him, by what robs him of joy and health, by what hinders him and keeps him bound, by all those things that keep him from experiencing life in its abundance. What is your name? What gives you life? What brings you to the core of your identity?

The same question needs to be asked of our beloved community? What is our name? I know the vestry is still asking this question. What is our vision? Who are we? And I wonder, what is the Legion of voices that have a foothold in this church?

Steve Lopez says, "Mental illness doesn't choose the most talented or the smartest or the richest or the poorest. It shows no mercy and often arrives like an unexpected storm, dropping an endless downpour on young dreams...and that, It is possible to cause seemingly biochemical changes through human emotional involvement. You literally have changed his chemistry by being his friend."

Whether it is full blown mental illness like in the case of Nathaniel Ayers from the streets of LA, or a kind of social schizophrenia that causes us to forget who we are, we are God's image bearers and God wants to love and friend us in a way that restores our true selves as God's beloved.

"A year ago, I met a man who was down on his luck and thought I might be able to help him. I don't know that I have. Yes, my friend Mr. Ayers now sleeps inside. He has a key. He has a bed. But his mental state, and his well-being, are as precarious now as they were the day we met. There are people who tell me I've helped him. Mental health experts who say that the simple act of being someone's friend can change his brain chemistry, improve his functioning in the world. I can't speak for Mr. Ayers in that regard. Maybe our friendship has helped him. But maybe not. I can, however, speak for myself. I can tell you that by witnessing Mr. Ayers's courage, his humility, his faith in the power of his art, I've learned the dignity of being loyal to something you believe in. Of holding onto it, above all else. Of believing, without question, that it will carry you home."

Like the demoniac, like Mr. Ayers, we have an opportunity this morning to release those demons, to get all the strings back on our violins and play beautiful music for the world to hear. As you receive the bread and wine this morning, remember who you are in Christ. You are not possessed. You are not those voices that say you are someone else. You are someone far more beautiful than you can even imagine and in this meal we will share in a few minutes, be reminded of the love that was expressed for you to become closer to image that God had in mind when God formed you. And if there are any demons that need to be released and they need a place to go this morning, there is a font in the back. Either after communion or before you depart simply place your hand in that water and allow the waters of baptism drown anything you don't want to carry out of this place this morning.

What is your name? What is your name?

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