2nd Sunday after Pentecost, June 22th, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 8:26-39 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
This past Thursday was "Juneteenth," June 19th, the date in 1865 that news of the end of slavery in the United States reached the last of the enslaved Americans, more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation had declared them free. Four years ago, Juneteenth became our newest national holiday. And I think it's a happy coincidence that it falls close to our national Independence Day celebration on July 4, because I don't think we can properly celebrate freedom without taking into account what a struggle it has been, and continues to be – and how the burden of that struggle has fallen unequally. I wrote the June cover article of our newsletter on why predominantly white congregations like ours should care about Juneteenth and why it is a theological and spiritual issue for us. I hope you'll have a look at that if you haven't already read it. And we'll continue in that vein in our Adult Sunday School today as we consider the reality of how freedom was denied and delayed following the official end of slavery.

Freedom is a theme of today's readings, especially the second and Gospel readings. The Gospel reading that we just heard is about Jesus freeing a man from his captivity to demons, which are surely bad things to be in captivity to. Paul's letter to the Galatians, though, speaks of freedom from the captivity of the law, God's law. That doesn't seem like it would be such a bad thing. After all, the law is for our own good, Paul says. But he also writes that it was meant to be temporary, and is not God's ultimate goal for us. The law, Paul says, sets us up for Jesus' work of forgiveness and reconciliation, which leads to a new heart aligned with God's will. And that's what real freedom looks like. "For freedom Christ has set you free," Paul writes later in this letter, and which we'll read next Sunday.

Keeping Paul's notion of freedom in mind, though, I want to focus mainly on our Gospel reading this morning and what the freeing of a possessed man and the reaction of his compatriots might have to say to our own times and predicaments.

The first thing I want us to notice in this story is how Jesus is in control of the situation from beginning to end. By this point in Luke's Gospel it has been well established that Jesus has power over sickness, sin, and demonic possession, which were all related things in the minds of ancient people. It is clear to almost everyone in Luke's narrative that Jesus has extraordinary authority and power in these kinds of situations – clear, that is, to everyone but his own people, and particularly the religious and political establishments of his people. Jesus has been curing sickness, casting out demons, and even raising the dead, but he also gets chased out of his home town by his old neighbors when he claims that he has been sent by God, that he is the fulfillment of prophecy. The irony here is that even the demons know the truth of this claim. They recognize Jesus for who he is, the "Son of the Most High God," and they recognize his power over them, right from the beginning of the encounter, to the point of begging him for mercy. And the rest of the story bears this out.

The second thing to consider here is the nature of this man's liberation by Jesus. How do we understand what's going on here? When's the last time you attended an exorcism, and how did it go? "Never" is the answer I expect from most of you. I was once asked to do an exorcism on a house that a family was convinced was haunted. Now although I am by nature and training a very skeptical person, which is maybe a surprising quality in a pastor, I am not dismissive of people's experiences. And I am skeptical enough to also be skeptical of my own skepticism, if you see what I mean. So I offered instead to do a house blessing, for which we have a service, and that seemed to fill the need. Maybe you didn't know we have such a service. Feel free to ask me about it, especially if you are moving to a new place. But back to the question of demons. How are modern

people like us supposed to think about stories of demonic possession? One way that has a long history is to equate possession with mental illness. That surely explains the behavior shown by the man in this story, doesn't it? In other cases, epilepsy has been proposed as the more likely explanation. I would caution us against this kind of approach, for a couple of reasons. First, it is speculation that really doesn't do anything to help us understand the point that these stories are trying to make, and second, conflating mental illness and demonic possession stigmatizes mental illness and prevents people from getting the help they need. The best way to approach these kinds of stories is to read them on their own terms. The point of this story today depends upon the premise that this man is under the power of forces beyond his control and that Jesus is willing and able to free him from that power. You don't have to believe in literal demons to appreciate that, or to apply it to your own life, because you are certainly aware of the limits of your own control. So, what are the destructive forces that have you in their grip? Greed? Selfishness? Fear? Apathy? Addiction? I just cautioned us against conflating demonic possession and mental illness, and addiction has at least a mental health component. But any of you who have experience with addiction, your own or that of someone close to you, know how "demonic" it can feel. And while I would not be quick to recommend an exorcism and would try to steer you to addiction specialists, seeing the spiritual side of addiction is surely helpful, and prayer is always appropriate.

But let's recognize also today a connection to the Juneteenth observance, and the experience of a significant subset of our population that was *literally* under the power of forces beyond its control when slavery was legal, and which in many ways continues to suffer the consequences of that evil to this day in all sorts of demonstrable ways. The conviction of the Christian faith is that Jesus has power and authority over those forces as well, together with all of the lingering attitudes and social structures that aid and abet them, and that he is at work even now to cast them out.

Finally, I want us to notice how the possessed man's own people reacted to Jesus' liberating work. They were afraid. But what were they afraid of? Were they afraid that Jesus was upsetting their apple cart and threatening their status quo? Were they comfortable with things as they had been, happy to have the possessed man in chains, living in tombs, and out of their hair? Were they worried about how their own lives might have to change if more marginalized people were rehabilitated and returned to society? Is that fear, perhaps, their *own* legion of demons possessing *them*? And were they afraid that Jesus would cast out those demons too? That's maybe reading too much into this story. Maybe. But I can't help but wonder if that is especially true of us in our own time and place. Are we not afraid of how caring for marginalized and oppressed people among us would change our way of life? Aren't we fearful of what it would cost us personally if, for example, we made sure that everyone who worked made a living wage – including the migrant workers on whom so much of our current system depends? Is our fear and self-centeredness not a kind of demon that possesses us, and from which we need to be freed? Maybe I'm wrong about that. But it's hard to read the Gospels without trying to diagnose our own times as Jesus diagnosed the times in which he walked the earth.

Whatever you think of my wonderings, it is abundantly clear from the biblical witness that Jesus came to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressors from the forces that enslave them. I will leave you to your own soul-searching to determine where you think we might fit in the big picture, especially this morning as the situation in the Middle East has suddenly been escalated. But whatever demons we need casting out, know that Jesus is on the job, working through our baptismal promise by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's probably going to upset our apple carts. It will cost us our false idols and illusions. But it is the way to true freedom from sin, death, and evil, freedom for which we were created and into which we are now called. May we trust that promise. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.