

Hostile Takeovers

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday after Pentecost, June 25, 1995. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Look at the Gerasene demoniac. We don't know how it happened but demons took possession of him. He began to do self-destructive things. He shunned human contact. He ran around naked. He lived in limestone caves used for tombs. He was out of control. People put him in chains. He broke the chains. They put him in prison. He escaped from prison. Jesus asked him his name. "Legion. My name's Legion." There were about 6000 soldiers in a Roman legion. The Gerasene demoniac was saying either, "There's thousands of people like me." Or he was saying, "I don't have just one or two demons. I have thousands." Was the Gerasene demoniac responsible for his demons? The Bible nowhere implies that he'd made some kind of pact with the devil. He was simply out of control. He had suffered a hostile takeover.

What do you make of this? Most of us know a smattering of psychology. We know a little about Sigmund Freud. There's a part of us that equates "mental illness" with demon possession. "Demon possession" is just a pre-scientific way of talking about mental illness. Mentally ill people sometimes do self-destructive things. Mentally ill people sometimes run around naked. Mentally ill people sometimes shun their friends. Mentally ill people sometimes prefer friendship with the dead rather than the living. People sometimes put chains on mentally ill people.

But I wouldn't be too quick to equate demon possession with mental illness. During World War 2 the great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, said that the horrors of the holocaust can be explained only as expressions of the demonic. The greatest 20th theologian, Karl Barth, wrote that demons are tyrants who falsely pretend to have the power to make us their prisoners and slaves. The psychiatrist M. Scott Peck is well versed in mental illness but he believes that some people are demon possessed. He's actually participated in exorcisms.

What's a demon possessed person like? It seems to me that the Gerasene demoniac has a lot in common with addicts. Thousands of men and women are caught up in addictions. I'm not saying that addicts are demon possessed people. Please don't misunderstand. I'm saying that addicts share some things in common with the Gerasene demoniac. They've lost control of their lives.

What's an addiction? It's a compulsion to use a drug to a point that it dominates one's life. An addiction is compulsive behavior of any kind. It could be gambling. It could be shopping every waking hour of the day, day after day. It could be television and video games. It could be cigarettes. It could be eating. Whatever dominates our life. If behavior is compulsive and out of control despite harmful consequences, then it's an addiction.

Addicts often try to manage their problem on their own. They condemn themselves They feel worthless. They feel condemned. They repeatedly make and then break promises to

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themselves. They do things they know will destroy their work, their self-respect, their relationships, their bank accounts. Like the Gerasene demoniac they feel that Christ wants nothing to do with them.

Gloria Hochman wrote an excellent article about addiction for the Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine a few years back. She wrote about Angela Marshall. She had her first drink when she was 16. It gave her a real kick. "I felt smarter, more attractive, more self-confident. I knew I never wanted to lose that feeling." For 20 years she tried to recapture that euphoria by drinking. At first she drank only on weekends. She began to drink a couple of vodkas on the rocks in the evening - every evening. She drank martinis for lunch, two or three of them.

For awhile she drank vodka from her expensive Waterford crystal. Later she slugged it down right from the bottle. Whatever upset her gave her an excuse to drink. She argued with her husband - she drank. A friend forgets her birthday - she drank. But today she's changed. She's in her right mind. She says, "I know that I'm an addict and that I'm powerless over my addiction."

Alcohol isn't the only addiction. In her article, Hochman goes on to write about a boy who discovered pornography when he was thirteen. The magazines gave him "an incredible ecstasy". The feeling temporarily replaced the sadness in his life. "I'd look at the pictures every chance I got. It was all I could think about. I didn't care about school anymore. Nothing else mattered." Then came X-rated movies. Even after marriage - after becoming a father - he sought sexual encounters away from

home - in massage parlors - with prostitutes. He was obsessed. He spent several thousand dollars a year but he still got no satisfaction. But today he's turned around dramatically. The demons of lust are being exorcised. "Today", he says, "I know that I'm an addict and that I'm powerless over my addiction."

Hochman also writes about a compulsive gambler who gambled away the mortgage money and wrecked his marriage and family. She writes about a woman who worked 140 hours a week - twenty hours a day for a week. All of these are like the Gerasene demoniac in this one respect - self-destructive behavior - compulsive behavior. The Gerasene demoniac was powerless over the demons within him. Jesus came to cast out demons. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. Jesus came to set us free. Only the all powerful word of God was able to deliver him.

Now let me put in a warning at this point. Sometimes we blame the devil for our sins. We excuse our addictions. We don't want to take responsibility. We laugh when we hear Flip Wilson say, "The devil made me do it." We try to escape responsibility for our self-destructive and sinful behavior by throwing the blame on the devil.

And that leads me to ask, "Are we responsible for our addictions?" Is it just a matter of will-power? Is it just a matter of trying harder? Or is an addict simply not responsible. Is she the victim of biological and social forces she may resist but is ultimately powerless to overcome?

One thing is sure. If we play around with evil, we may eventually be controlled by evil. If we play around with things that are addictive, we may eventually become addicted. Another thing is sure. We're responsible for what we do with our

addictions once we have them. Will we seek help? Will we admit the truth about ourselves - that we, on our own, are powerless over our addictions. We need other people to support us in our recovery. We need to be responsible to others for our behavior. We need to tell others about the marvelous grace of God when we have victory over our addictions - even if that victory is only temporary. Addicts who are serious about recovery must at some point take responsibility for the wreckage that surrounds their addiction. The Gerasene demoniac began to do that when he met Jesus.

The addict who comes to God in Jesus Christ has made the big decision. She's made the right decision. But that decision isn't enough. Like all sinners, the addict also needs to unlearn old habits. ~~She needs to move along the road to recovery one~~ small, step at a time. She needs to tell others what's happening to her. She needs to praise God for every victory.

Let me close by saying that all of us are addicts in some way. All of us are addicted to sin - sinful pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, sloth. These things will kill us. They'll destroy our relationship with God. They'll destroy our relationship with our friends and neighbors. They'll rob us of eternal life.

And the first step to recovery is the confession, "I know I'm an addict and that I'm powerless over my addiction. I need Jesus Christ. I need - not just the God who forgives - but also the God who heals. And I need the church, the Body of Christ. I need the church to really be the church - a place of recovery. A

place where we can meet face to face and share our struggles and
praise God for our victories.

Faithful God: you have power to set us free from harmful habits and weakness of the will. May those who are hooked on drugs, or gripped by cravings too strong to control, be given freedom. Keep us from condemning the weakness of others while we overlook our own ungoverned desires. Enable us to help those who can no longer help themselves, so that they may see your power and believe in Jesus Christ, the liberator.
Amen.