

Progressive Christianity 4: What is Our Future?

[Luke 8:26-39](#)

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*We strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth.*

*We commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.*

Each of us has a story. Your story has a setting of where and when you were born and all the places you have lived. It has your family members and significant friends as characters. Your story also has a plot, the sequence of all the important events of your life—perhaps successes or hardships that have defined your character. Personal dreams may have urged you on and shaped the person you are today.

Your story is you. It is tied to your name. That's the way it was for the man with the demons in our passage from Luke. Jesus wanted to know the man's story, and so he asked him his name. "Legion," the man said. We're thinking, that's a strange name. A Roman legion was an army of 5000! The people of Jesus' time hated the Roman soldiers who occupied Palestine. For the man to say his name was "Legion" was to say that a powerful, hostile army of invading soldiers had taken over his mind and his body. He must have been miserable. We might say he was "possessed," or that "he wasn't in his right mind," or that "he had lost his mind."

But Jesus cared enough to ask his name. Now, remember, this man was naked and homeless, not the kind of guy you'd just go up to to start a friendly conversation. The man had been yelling at Jesus, "shrieking" and "falling down." Most people would have stayed clear of that kind of man.

But Jesus saw something in the man, more than craziness—more than mental illness. Jesus heard him call him "Jesus, Son of the Most High God." Jesus saw in him potential for transformation. He saw in him the chance of a new life story.

So then there was this elaborate healing miracle—with the demons pleading (like voices inside the man) to enter this herd of pigs. And then the pigs—possessed by the demons—rushed down the cliff and drowned in the lake.

Oh, and one more detail in telling this story: This story is always called the "Gerasene Demoniac." Jesus doesn't call the man that, but the compilers and editors of our bibles put a heading over the passage. They give the man a couple of labels, kind of like "crazy foreigner." I suppose that's what the people around the lake called him. He wasn't one of them, that's for sure. He was a "Gerasene Demoniac," a man from Jerash with demons, or a "crazy foreigner." The people probably never bothered to ask his name or hear his story.

Today is the fourth week of my sermon series on Progressive Christianity. We are looking at the last two tenets today. They speak about our future as Christians: Will we protect and restore the Earth, and will we pursue a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love?

Individuals have a story, and our world has a story. The story of the world is grounded in God's creation of the Earth and the role God gives to humankind to be its stewards. But along the way, the story veers away from good stewardship. We seem to be possessed with selfish demons. We squander the earth's resources. We pollute its rivers and lakes. We take more than our share of the manna God has provided. The demons overpower us, and we can't control what's happening. If God were to ask, "What is your name?" we might have to answer, "Legion," for we feel powerless against demonic forces, powerless to change the course of our own destruction.

The story of our world is not only about our physical earth. It is also about the human society we have created. We have put labels on one another. "Crazy foreigner" is just one of them. "Gays" and "Terrorists" are other labels. Hatred breeds in these labels. This week our country's story has taken a tragic turn. Last weekend, a man in Orlando, Florida shot more than one hundred innocent people, killing 49 and wounding 53. The shooter was a young Muslim man, perhaps with ties to ISIS. The people he shot were having a good time and celebrating gay pride at a nightclub. This is the worst shooting in American history, in the American story, our story. We feel powerless to stop the hatred and the violence. Demons seem to have taken over us as a people. And we have been invaded by a "legion" of emotions. We've watched the story unfold this week in the news. It's a story of fear and sadness.

But the story isn't over because we have a resource to hold on to and to claim. We who are Christians have already recognized the Son of the Most High God. Jesus is already part of our story as Christians. In fact, Jesus is the central character of our story. And even now, in a time of darkness in our nation, Jesus asks us our name and wants to change the trajectory of our narrative. Jesus sees the potential in us for transformation.

Progressive Christians have choices how to interpret the bible, how to express our faith, and how to understand theology. One way to understand God is through what is called process theology. Process theology operates with a concept of humans as co-creators with God. Instead of the more orthodox view that God intervenes in nature as a supernatural being and causes change (as in answering our prayers for healing or in punishing us by sending natural disaster), in process theology humans effect change with God in partnership. God is not all-powerful; rather God desires to be in relationship with us, working with us for change that is possible.

Process theology is very future-oriented. Nothing is set in stone. There is always a potential for change, but the change is dependent on cooperation. How willing are we to cooperate with God? The man with the demons recognized Jesus, the Son of the Most High God. Will we? Will we give Jesus a chance to change our story's ending?

Terrorism and hatred of people who are different are realities of life today. Fear has invaded our souls like a mental sickness. Even if, as individuals, we are not guilty of hate crimes or gun violence ourselves, we are part of a society inhabited by a "Legion" of demons of anger and aggression. A person like Omar Mateen can purchase a gun readily. He has cultivated such an irrational hatred or fear of people who are gay—perhaps fear of himself being gay—that he plans a mass murder. He is so sick that his friends say he is unstable. His language is full of hurtful names for people. His parents say it is not about religion, but that their son was an angry young man. Omar's ex-wife said he beat her. She said he suffered from a mental illness.

The shooting of last Sunday surfaces all the ugly sickness of human sin. One year ago Friday, in Charleston, a young white supremacist gunned down nine church people, including their pastor, having bible study in church. Where can we hide to protect ourselves? We are not safe at a nightclub, in a movie theatre, in a school, at a city marathon, at a Christmas party, on an airplane, or in church...

This sin of hatred and violence has invaded our story, and it is nearly defining who we are.

Yet we are ones who know the Son of the Most High God. We have a relationship with the Christ, the Messiah, who has come to be the Lord of love even in a world of hate.

With God, we can change our story. We can be co-creators of a world with peace and hope. But to rewrite our story, we need to be learners, life-long learners. We need to let go of our prejudices and learn about Islam and befriend our Muslim neighbors. Yes, we will learn that Islamic belief does not approve of homosexuality. But if we know Muslims well enough to talk about this, we can respectfully agree to disagree. Progressive Christians are inclusive and willing to live with difference of opinion.

If we are open to cooperate in the miracle of God's healing, we will also need to commit to compassion. That means we will need to teach love and acceptance to our children, and our parents, and our neighbors. We will need to act with kindness toward people who are gay, toward people who are anti-gay, toward people who suffer from mental illness, toward people who call God Allah, and even toward people who hate our country. "Love your enemies," Jesus said. Even in the midst of hatred, we are to demonstrate compassion. Mahatma Gandhi knew how to do this. Even when people disrespected him in South Africa as a person of color, he did not respond in anger. He responded in love. And in India, he demanded that even the lowest class people, the untouchables, be called "children of God," and he worked for their improved living conditions. Compassion and non-violence broke the chains of English rule in India.

If we are to be open to cooperating with God for a better world, then we must demonstrate selfless love. We must care more about others and less about ourselves. This may be the hardest step for us. Affluence is a kind of demon. For our storyline to change from the sickness of greed, we must care more about the common good. We must work for equal opportunity, decent living conditions, and the eradication of diseases like malaria and the Zika virus that especially affect the poor. People will care about others in varied ways:

Some will prepare meals and be drivers; others will become allies in Circles for Change. Some will serve on work teams; others will tutor at the library. Some will speak out for the rights of those who are marginalized. Others will learn to love people in their own families who come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. If we want to grow spiritually, we will think more about others' needs than our own.

When we become co-creators with God, when we continue learning, when we act with compassion, and when we draw the circle wide to include people who are different from us, then we will have a new story to tell.

At the end, Jesus told the man with the demons, "Return home and tell the story of what God has done for you" (v. 39). I am convinced that we do not need to let the demons of hatred and violence define us. With God and with one another, we can cast off those demons. We have another story to tell. It's a story of goodness, and love, and hope.