

A sermon preached at Zion, North Branford

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Texts: Luke 8:26-39

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Recent polling indicates that Americans are the most anxious people in the world. 45% of people interviewed in the U.S. indicated that they had been anxious or worried the previous day, compared with 35% in the rest of the world. When you consider how much of the world is currently experiencing civil war, it is astonishing that we could be more anxious than any other people. And yet, keeping up the appearance of being happy has become something of a national religion.

Barbara Ehrenreich, whom you might know from her expose, *Nicked and Dimed in America*, wrote a book in which she claims that 'positive thinking' has become the American ideology. While no one would dispute that it is preferable to be happy, and that positive thoughts can lift one's mood and make interactions with others more pleasant, Ehrenreich contends that 'positivity' has been taken to extremes. 'Reckless enthusiasm' as she calls it, the unshakeable belief that things are getting better and better, can blind people to reality and even to signs of imminent danger.

First coined by Norman Vincent Peale in 1952, 'positive thinking' was promoted as the ticket to happiness and success. Once derided by mainstream thinkers, this science of happiness has morphed into corporate motivational workshops, prosperity preaching, and has now become a pervasive presence in our culture. Peale taught that if a negative thought comes into your mind, you should immediately voice a positive thought to cancel it out. Some have become so focused on not hearing anything negative, that they refuse to listen to the news or be told anything that isn't 'positive.'

Along with focusing on oneself and one's own attitudes, Peale and many contemporary happiness coaches warn that the negativity of other people will harm your chances of being successful in life. Joel Osteen says 'you will never do anything positive or meaningful with negative people in your life.' I've come across numerous memes on social media in the past year which recommend dropping all negative people from your life. And just who are these 'negative' people? One article listed 14 such people including

- People who aren't living up to their potential
- People who are overweight
- People who are 'needy'
- People who complain

Banishing these people from your life, the 'positive thinking crowd' believes, will save your future happiness and ensure your prosperity. Far from being a new phenomenon, this philosophy has been around for thousands of years.

In the ancient world, it was believed that if the priest laid all the sins of the people on a goat, and then drove the goat out into the wilderness, the sins of the people would be removed from them. They would be free of their burden of guilt and all would be well for the coming year. Over time this practice evolved into banishing certain people from the midst of the community, piling blame onto a human scapegoat and excommunicating them.

This is the story that we heard in today's gospel, when Jesus meets the Gerasenes demoniac, a man who was no longer living in his community amongst family, friends, and neighbors, but roaming naked among the tombs opposite Galilee. The story is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. Many commentators over the centuries have speculated what exactly it was that was wrong with the man, but the text gives us no clues. The specifics are not important to the story.

The man is in extreme distress and when Jesus asks what demon possesses him, the answer is, Legion for there were many. Jesus heals the man by sending this multitude of demons into a herd of swine that rush over a cliff and into the sea. Theologian Rene Girard points out that once again Jesus reverses the status quo by introducing a spiritual power greater than the power wielded by society. He reverses the violence of society and eliminates the scapegoat mechanism. Instead of the crowd being saved and the victim thrown off the cliff, in this story the crowd is thrown into the sea and the victim is saved. Although the man who has been healed and is now in his right mind wants to follow Jesus and his companions, Jesus asks him to instead return to town and tell everyone what God has done for him. In this way, not only the man, but his community can be reconciled and healed.

I used to chuckle at the story of the priest sending a goat into the wilderness to rid the people of their sins. How primitive, I thought to believe such a thing! Even its evolved form in Jesus' day of assigning a human scapegoat seems no less archaic. But I have come to recognize that we are no more evolved in society today. We continue to assign scapegoats to relieve our rampant anxiety. When we don't know the sources of our anxiety or economic distress, we still assign blame and banish the accused from our midst. People who point out wrong doing are harassed and fired from their jobs. Immigrants are depicted as demonic and deported. People of color are arrested and incarcerated at disproportionate rates.

To follow Jesus in our current situation we would do well to become aware of where this scapegoat mechanism is at work in our personal and corporate circles. Where are we heaping our own Legion of blame and shame on others who do not meet our expectations? How are we contributing to the distress of others in order to relieve our own discomfort? Whom have we ignored or banned as though they would infect us with their supposed negativity?

Let us pray to the one who has the capacity to heal us, restore us, and reconcile us.

Loving God, you know our hearts and the legion of anxieties that infect us and the fears that possess our lives. Forgive us for the ways we have projected these onto others. Heal us. Heal our nation, that we might live in harmony and respect the dignity of every human person. In Christ we pray, Amen.