Identity theft…..I imagine there are very few of us that have not been touched in some way by an attempt at gaining access to our personal information by some unknown entity for their own personal gain. It is an unfortunate reality of living in these electronic times. It was not that long ago that I received a call while at home from my credit card company asking if I had purchased $275 worth of items at an Alabama Walmart on that day. How my information was obtained is a mystery. My credit card was right there in my wallet. It is at best disconcerting. No one seems to be outside of the reach of cyber mischief, even our church communities have been used to attempt fraud, the perpetrators copying the very ways we address each other, all in order to impersonate someone we know and to gain our trust.

Our identities are precious to us; who and what we are, where we were born, who we are born to, what we believe, what we value, how we move, and care, and live our lives within community…these are the dimensions of our being, those are the things that in so many ways define us. And when, for some reason some outside force tries to reach into our private lives and steal from us, to take and misuse our name and our reputation, we feel violated, compromised, wounded, abused, like a vital part of us has been removed from our control. This is just what we are seeing in this man we have come to know only as “the Gerasene Demoniac”.

This story of possession, this extreme identity theft, appears in some manner in Matthew, Mark and Luke’s gospel. In Luke today, we find Jesus setting out for a Gentile land “opposite Galilee”. This is Jesus’ only intentional journey to Gentile territory, a crossing of boundaries, of traversing ethnic and cultural borders. And strangely, the first individual Jesus meets, immediately after disembarking in this new place, is a man living in the tombs. He did not meet him in the center of the city, but out on the edge, living amidst the dead. One commentator[[1]](#footnote-1) called this a *“liminal space - the in-between – between town and country, between farmland and desert, between land and sea, between life and death.”*

The man’s story is the very picture of tragic. He is alone, distressed, worn-out, naked, a danger to himself, and living in place that is considered most unclean. Perhaps this burial place is where people are most comfortable having someone like him staying; far from civilization, far from their sight and mind. This possession may make us uncomfortable as well. I mean, how often do we think of demons in this day and age?

This man is more than possessed, he is occupied. When Jesus asks for his name, the answer is “Legion”, for many demons have taken residence in him. Legion is a Roman military term, referring to an organized unit of soldiers, 3,000-6,000 in number. He is completely overcome, controlled by dangerous impulses, and oppressed. It is disturbing to the core that this person has no name. No identity remains for him beyond that of the unclean spirits that hold him captive.

I’d like for us to consider something…..*Evil has two purposes: for us to forget God and to forget who we are, not necessarily in that order. If the devil can get us to forget who we are, then eventually we will forget whose we are, and in whose image we are made. You see, demons are anything that can stake a claim on our souls.*[[2]](#footnote-2) And there are certainly many voices that seek to claim our identity, some within and many outside of us. They try to tell us who we are, to compromise our identity, to steal the knowledge of who we are, and to give to us false names, brand us with demeaning stigma and labels, and come to us as idols to temp us, bringing empty promises of safety and security, exploiting fear and a sense of false scarcity as a weapon of control.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatian church, seeks to shake the community back to their senses. They have forgotten that they have been baptized into Christ and are thereby full members in the Spirit. He tells them have become confused by false preaching and teaching that seeks to impose dominance of the religious practices of one group onto another, so that the Gentiles and pagans, new to the faith, now doubt their identity as full members of Christ’s Body. Paul reminds them….. they are clothed in Christ, and that makes them “enough” in God’s eyes. They must never forget this.

The sense of unity in Christ is palpable in Paul’s passionate writing. *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”*  And, it is important for us to not confuse unity as a having a lack of diversity. We are certainly not all the same, yet we can recognize our common identity as beloved children of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor reflects on the aftermath of the Pentecost story where the disciples speak in diverse languages that allow others to hear the Word of God. *“Once the disciples have settled down and their flames have gone back to the pilot light, they face the same challenges everyone else does; making themselves understood to people who do not speak their language. Like it or not, human diversity is here to stay. All that remains to be seen is how we will deal with it.” [[3]](#footnote-3)*

Paul presents us with a diverse sense of identity in Galatians, a release from the rigidity of either/or thinking, one group lording over another, with an invitation into the wideness of both/and living in Christ. Even as we are clothed in Christ, there remain social and cultural distinctions. Living into our identity in Christ is an eradication of dominance, not the removal difference.

Perhaps we might think of it in terms of harmony. We receive the gift of this each Sunday. “*Harmony is a cooperative union of different voices. The various vocal parts must maintain their distinctiveness, even as they unite, if* *harmony is to exist.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Freedom from division is the work and gift of God. Theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman once wrote, *“The awareness of self, that one is a child of God, stabilizes the self, leading to courage and power.”* As we live into our identity of whose we are, we may find the strength in unity to dismantle the false barriers and constructs of race, gender, social position, who we are to love, political affiliations and nationalism that imprison and hold hostage our own lives, and those of our communities, our nation, and our planet.

It is a high calling to cherish diversity, to value everyone for their inherent dignity, no matter how they do or don't fit into our personal view of what’s what - to open our minds and eyes to see the image and likeness of God in a myriad of very different faces and ways of being.

I think it’s curious that Jesus journeys to a Gentile region, goes right to a cemetery, heals the man possessed by the demonic Legion, and after encountering a community of people that do not welcome the change in the status quo, he gets in the boat sails right back to Galilee. It seems that the purpose of Jesus’ whole journey is so that he might heal this one person of the demons that have taken his name and life and transform him from living with the dead and restore him to life as beloved child of God.

Jesus comes to challenge and cast out every power that prevents us from living fully and freely as human beings created in God’s image. Perhaps then, it might not surprise us that Jesus is still crossing boundaries today, breaking into our lives, lifting us out of the tombs, releasing us from the demons of separation, division and fearful prejudices that plague us, clothing us in the garments of our Baptism, and continually restoring to us our identity as beloved.

We are called as a church to respond to the world as ones clothed in Christ. The identity thieves in this world will not succeed. "No longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female.” No longer divided... because we are one.

Amen.

1. The Very Rev. Sherry Crompton, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paraphrased from June 28, 2013 sermon Grace Episcopal Church, Burnswick, MD. Author unidentified. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Taylor, Barbara Brown. Holy Envy, Finding God in the Faith of Others. p.187. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Braxton, Brad. Connection Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Volume 3, Year C. p.98. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)