My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

This week we have a bunch of images that hit our ears, eyes, and heart this week, didn’t we? It’s summer time, now, so we’re going to get a little more interactive. What did you notice (take all answers).

I think for my mind this week, I first thought about why there would be pigs in a mostly Jewish part of Israel, because pigs are ritually unclean and it seems like this kind of herd would not be all that attractive to sell at market if the locals could not eat it. But beyond that, I think what caught my attention was the man who lived amongst the tombs.

He was homeless. He was naked. He made his living quarters in places that no one else would dare to go, in the graveyard and among the dead. The description here is of a person who was not just an outcast, but it seems as if he had been this way for some time.

The man was tortured by things he couldn’t control. In my mind’s eye, he had probably been this way for quite some time, and the story depicts the destructive power of what happens when one is totally rejected by society. It is a demonstration of the total destruction of an individual life, and the power that can have over an entire community that is complicit in the rejection of one who is completely at odds with their community norms on every level. Employment, or lack thereof. Clothes, or lack of them. Living amongst them, or not, instead living in the land of the dead. And comportment, or refusing the norms of the community such that he is tortured, or so he admits to Jesus.

The man has no name. I don’t think that would be all that unusual to us, would it? What would we do if we were to see someone who was talking to himself and doing other strange movements or utterances on the streets of Greenland or Portsmouth? Do we approach, or ask his name? Why not?

Because we, like the people living around this man, have grown accustomed to a culture of fear, and we have set up a series of controls to make sure that this man is monitored and kept at a safe distance. He’s chained up when he gets a little too out of control. He’s allowed to exist where no one can see him, and he’s out of sight and away from the children, driven away into solitary places.

This man has no identity apart from is affliction, does he? It makes me ask, and I think it should make all of us wonder, how many of us classify those we work with and know in our families and social circles by our failures, or at least our disappointments and setbacks. It’s easy to point out the one who almost made it, the one who didn’t marry well, the one who didn’t study hard enough or the one who succumbed to ravages of substance abuse. We just as easily assign these folks in our lives to the margins, granting them the emotional equivalent of living amongst the tombs, as the man in our story.

Why is it that every time we want to try something new and be vulnerable, we are reminded of every failure, and every disappointment we’ve experienced before? Perhaps because we’ve allowed these things to possess us. Not always, but enough to rob us of the life God hopes that we experience. We, too, are Legion.

How much do we tolerate evil we think we can control? Especially when it distracts us from true systemic change? How often do we identify, or maybe even fabricate, a common enemy to unite divided factions - thereby keeping us from addressing our own shortcomings, blind spots, and divisions?

In today’s story, the Gerasenes knew the locus of the evil, knew where the man lived, and devoted considerable time and expense trying to guard and to control him. A community can quite quickly and easily learn to live with demonic forces, isolating and partially controlling them. This partially successful balance of tolerance and management of the demonic among them also allowed the people to keep attention off their own lives. But now the power of God for good comes to their community and it disturbs a way of life they had come to accept. Think about it: God came into their lives and yet it was not welcomed, but they were pretty upset by it.

Imagine that. Have we heard that one before?

What kinds of things do we think we might be possessed by here in this time, in this place, Greenland? C’mon, this is interactive, remember. (take all answers). OK, and how about these? Anxiety, depression, isolation, greed, self-doubt. Do we engage people who express these things, or do we smile sweetly and slowly isolate them away from our community, when what they need most is to be more ***included*** in our community? When the townsfolk went out to see what happened when the man rushed the boat to confront Jesus, and they found that he was clothed, in his right mind, and sitting with God, what was their reaction?

They were afraid. And so what did they do? They were overcome with fear when they heard how the man had been healed, and they asked Jesus to leave. People are strange aren’t they?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Odd as it may sound, we often prefer the devil we know to the freedom we do not. Congregations too can take a false sense of security from the dysfunctions they have learned to cope with, and they fear what change—even change for health—may bring. Communal identity is in this sense more difficult to change than individual identity. Indeed, if Luke's depiction of Jesus' ministry is any indication, effecting change among a fearful community can be even more difficult than stilling storms or casting out demons.

What fears do we have and harbor? What might hold us back from engaging with the community around us, or are we living among the tombs but just not seeing or admitting it? God came a long was from across the sea to heal one man and then go back home.

There are so many voices trying to possess and discourage us that we might still call them Legion. Yet against all of them stands the still, small, but mighty voice of the one who still crosses oceans and boundaries to tell us of God’s love and call us back to our right minds and grace-filled identities.

How about it? Are we healed or in need of healing? That question should be on our lips and hearts this week. Thanks be to God, Amen.