

Cryptobiotic

Preached FCCW June 23, 2019

Luke 8:26-39 and Galatians 3:23-39

While the plants and trees that grow in Sedona's desert landscape appear to be rugged and just about indestructible, something I learned on my Summer vacation is that it is actually an extremely fragile ecosystem. At most trailheads there are signs emphasizing the importance of not wandering from established trails just to get a better look at a scenic vista or to take a selfie beside a prickly-pear cactus. "Don't Bust the Crust" is a slogan found at just about every trail kiosk.

Cherlita—our trail guide—gave us a demonstration of what "Don't Bust the Crust" means. Gathering us around a spot at the edge of the trail we were on, she asked us to describe what we saw when we looked down at our feet. Most of us agreed that the answer was "Dirt." That's when she told us that what we were seeing was not just any dirt. It was Cryptobiotic soil. Cryptobiotic, she explained, literally means "hidden life."

Cryptobiotic soil is permeated with microbes and bacteria and fungi that produce mucus and spin filaments which sounds gross and disgusting but is actually all good because the mucus binds the soil to prevent erosion and the filaments hold water in the soil which plants depend on to survive. All these organisms that can't be seen add up to the "dirt" we thought we were looking at being literally alive.

To demonstrate, Cherlita took out her canteen, knelt down at the edge of the trail and poured a small amount of water on the ground. The "hidden life" of the soil began to swell and percolate on contact with the moisture, so that the "dirt" seemed to come alive before our eyes. A single errant human footprint though, can destroy cryptobiotic life in a way that can take decades to recover. When we resumed our hike, it was with a new, profound awareness of the importance of not straying from the beaten path.

When Jesus and his disciples made landfall in the country of the Gerasenes they had wandered about as far from the established path as a boatful of Galileans could possibly go. Luke describes the land of the Gerasenes as being "opposite Galilee," which would place it somewhere on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Wherever it was on the map, it was "opposite of Galilee" in more than a geographic sense.

The first clue that they were no longer in Jewish territory was the large herd of pigs that were grazing on a hill near where Jesus and the disciples had put to shore. Being that pigs were considered by Jews to be unclean animals, and to be avoided at any cost, swineherding was an industry that would only be found in Gentile territory. The second clue that they weren't in Galilee anymore, was the first person to greet them. If Gentiles in general were looked down on

as spiritually dead in the Jewish way of reckoning these things, this poor guy made the rest of his countrymen look like choirboys.

It says that he was a man of the city. But the key word there is *was*. Whatever community this unfortunate fellow might have belonged to at one time, his only neighbors now were the dead. He made his home now among the tombs and crypts, where he had adopted some rather anti-social habits—like not wearing clothes. The graveyard was a good place for him, because he was as good as dead to the Gerasenes. His appearance and erratic behavior caused people in the city to feel threatened. They were quite content to have him keep his distance, and on those occasions when he wandered too close for comfort, he would be locked up in chains and shackles and thrown into prison.

Whoever this man once was, that identity was now buried so completely that his very name was long forgotten and replaced by the name of the demons who inhabited him. Legion. A Legion in the Roman army consisted of between five and six *thousand* soldiers. Which gives you some idea of the degree of hopelessness to which this tortured soul had been lowered. Like one of those villainous zombies from *The Walking Dead* TV series, he was barely recognizable as human.

Except, of course, to Jesus.

When Legion confronts Jesus and the disciples, Jesus commands the demons to depart from the man. Which they do, by entering the herd of pigs, who then react by rushing like lemmings into the sea. Well, the people in the city hear about this from the swineherds and they come out to see for themselves what is going on. And what do they find? This man who had been an unholy terror is now seated peacefully at the feet of Jesus. He is wearing clothing. More importantly, he is clothed in his right mind. For the first time in a long time, they see the hidden life of the man instead of the demons.

They should be happy, right? But it says that they were seized with great fear. And they ask Jesus to leave. They were afraid of the man when he was demon possessed. Now, it seems they are even more afraid that Jesus has delivered him from his demons.

Maybe what they are most afraid of is--what do they do now? Their reasons for excluding this man from the community have been removed. But maybe their distrust lingers. Do they dare to risk accepting him back into their midst without the assurance of chains and shackles and prison cell to control him?

When human beings are fearful of what or who is different—whether they are migrants, the mentally ill, or those with different religious beliefs—it can be easier to demonize and exclude them, then to recognize the humanity that is hidden beneath the threat we believe them to pose. It can feel safer to simply build walls to keep them out, than to try to understand underlying causes of their divisions. But as the Gerasenes will tell you, chains and shackles and

prison walls were never all that effective at helping them feel safe for very long. The more they tried to control the one they feared the more fearsome he became in their minds.

Jesus calls us to take a cryptobiotic approach to what or who frightens us. To look at what seems lifeless, with sensitivity and compassion for the humanity hidden there. To see through the eyes of compassion rather than fear. For some, that is more frightening than the original object of our fears. Even for those who claim to follow Christ. In our own way, we ask Jesus to stay out of our conflicts with his advice about treating others as we would be treated, and loving the unlovable. Which may be why so many Christians today seem to be abandoning the trail Jesus blazed and venturing off trail onto the path of demonization instead.

Jesus reminds us that we are all on a kind of cryptobiotic spectrum. The life of Christ is hidden to one degree or another in all of us; hidden by the legion of unresolved stuff that gets in the way of Christ's life being visible to others in the ways we behave. The Apostle Paul wrote that, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Jesus instructed the man he had healed of his demons to go home, and to proclaim to all what great things God had done for him. In other words, Jesus sent him on a kind of missionary journey. A journey of dispelling the fears people had about him by letting them witness with their own eyes what God had done for him. And what, therefore, God could do for them. Because sometimes we grow more comfortable with fending off demons than with the task of understanding and reconciliation. Our fears take on a life of their own. Demons of fear driven hatred, injustice and inhumanity come to define our inner life and our outer actions. And, they beg not to be disturbed, just like the Legion of demons did when confronted by Jesus. Fear is a God given response to protect us from danger. But fear itself can become the greater danger. The footprint of fear upon our souls can crush the inner life of the Spirit.

In cryptobiotic terms, the waters of our baptism, which marked our relationship to Jesus, also brings the Christ-life—the image of God—hidden within is—to the surface; the way water sprinkled on what looked like dead dirt called forth the hidden life at our feet on that trail. Through baptism we are clothed in Christ, like the man was clothed in his right mind. Like him, we are sent to proclaim the great things that God has done for us. Which can raise a hope in others for what God can do for them. And where that happens, the demons of fear and hatred lose their power.