

Who In Their Right Mind?  
Luke 8:26-39  
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Well, John Fillah is back in the news. You may remember when I told you about St. Cloud, Minnesota's very own Superman, Mr. John Fillah, who dresses up as the caped crusader and stands on street corners announcing in a loud voice truth, justice, and the American way, and, without even saying a word, the need for mental health care coverage for the poor. The last time I mentioned him, he was actually being commended for saving someone who was about to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. Now, however, Superman is back in the news because he has just been acquitted of the crime of disorderly conduct, charged as he was following an altercation with a physically disabled pedestrian who took issue with Superman noting that he walked with a limp. Turns out that truth, justice and the American way still include freedom of speech, as the verdict was announced by Judge Frederick Grunke.

John Fillah wanders not among tombs, but street corners. He does not go around unclothed, but rather dressed up as a comic book superhero. He does shout in the same loud voice as the man who called himself Legion. The police had him under lock and key, like Legion in his chains, but they both got free. To some, John Fillah is mentally ill. To others, he is possessed by demons. Either way, he is one of today's legions of Legion, even if he isn't pleading with God for a miracle.

Before we return to Superman's heroics, let's take a look at what happens in this passage from Luke. Jesus and his disciples have just spent the night crossing the Sea of Galilee after Jesus has suggested they take a little tour outside the bounds of Israel. During that night, "a windstorm swept down the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger. They went to him and woke him up, saying, 'Master, Master, we are perishing.' And Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm." That tonight's passage might sound eerily similar substituting the storm for the Legion is no accident. These stories are told together in such a way as to make that parallel very clear; that Jesus puts in order that which is in chaos, much the way God made order out of chaos in the very beginning. Read further tonight, and you would see that Jesus does the very same thing for a family thrust into chaos upon the death of a beloved daughter: he calms the storm raging within them, by showing his mastery over even death, just as he did over nature, and the very demons of hell.

So Jesus disembarks and is confronted by a man described in the most pathetic of terms: a raging mess of a man, living an isolated life, tormented by so many demons that the only word he can use to describe himself is one drawn from the Roman military, a legion of soldiers numbering some 6000 people. The demons recognize Jesus, fear him, and look for an alternative to going to the abyss, which I think we can assume from their request is a place even demons don't want to go. Then they beg him to be sent instead into the nearby pigs, a request which

Jesus rather mysteriously grants, since for my money there is no better place for a demon than the abyss. But hey, he must have known what he was doing. The rest of the story is well known; the demons go into the pigs, the pigs go into the water, and the townspeople go to Jesus and tell him to leave utterly unmoved by the marvelous thing which has just happened. And the man formerly called Legion is found in his right mind, seated at the feet of Jesus, happier than happy to be freed from his possession, and ready to follow Jesus anywhere.

The phrase “right mind,” seems perfectly appropriate to describe the anti-Legion, as we’ll call him, post-deliverance. It is, of course, not that he is now creatively using the right side of his brain, in addition to his analytical left side, but that he has a clear mind, an uncluttered mind, a mind that now chooses which one voice to follow instead of being compelled to follow six thousand. His mind is right because his brain now seems to correspond to the size of his head, because it no longer knocking around side to side in his skull, because it is not twisted around on his spinal cord. His mind is right because he can now be certain of what he sees, and rejoice in what he hears. His mind is right because God made it right.

This description of being in one’s “right mind” begs the question of what is its opposite, what is a “wrong mind,” so to speak. Besides it being the obvious condition the anti-Legion experienced before meeting Jesus, to be of a wrong mind is represented by those who marched right past the man sitting at Jesus’ feet to get into Jesus’ face, to tell him to leave their area before he could do any more

economic damage. Those pigs were quite an investment I am sure, one now lying at the bottom of the lake. Of course they were afraid. But they were also out of the minds with fear, so wrong-minded that they could not even pause to celebrate with the man who was now in his right mind, a man who could now be their friend, their swineherd, even their guide through the tombs, a man whom they no longer needed to chain up for being a threat to self or others. To be wrong minded is to focus on the law rather than the grace, to remember the faults rather than to forgive them, to place the interests of self over the interests of others.

The story is told of the final exam of a preaching class at Princeton Seminary. Each of the students was required to preach during a weekly campus chapel service, but each week, unbeknownst to the student charged with delivering the message for that day, an obstacle had been placed in their path requiring the student to turn up running late, a flat tire, a traffic jam, that kind of thing. And if that weren't enough to test the mettle of these young preachers, a homeless person was perfectly placed lying on the steps to the door to the chapel, a tangible obstacle to the delivery of the message. But don't you know, that in their rush to make it to church on time, to bring a very important message of hope and salvation, not one of those students paused to tend to the man, but rather, stepped right over him, and in so doing, failed their final exam, and found themselves in their wrong mind. Not only the demon possessed are wrong minded.

I could probably go on at length with examples of people who are not in their right mind, like people who still oppose alternative fuels after witnessing the mess in the Gulf of Mexico. But I'd prefer to tell you about people who are in their right mind, people who, whether or not they are Christians, tell us something about what being in our right minds, sitting at the feet of Jesus, is all about. And so I ask you, who in their right mind costs themselves several hundred thousand dollars and the chance to win their first professional golf tournament by calling a penalty on themselves that no one else saw? That would be Brian Davis, at this year's Verizon Heritage Tournament. Professional golfer Brian Davis would have won his very first PGA tournament and \$1,026,000, but instead he had to settle for 2nd place and \$615,000 after calling a penalty on himself in a sudden death playoff which gave another golfer the win. What was his crime? Flicking a single blade of grass during his backswing on a shot played from a hazard, a place on the golf course in which you are not allowed to disturb anything until you hit the ball. Remember that no one else saw the infraction, and Brian Davis could have kept that knowledge to himself and walked away with an easy win that might have done wonders for the rest of his career, not to mention the extra more than four hundred thousand dollars. But for Brian Davis, being in his right mind was more important than the win, the money, and most certainly the knowledge that he had won under less than honest circumstances.

Who in their right mind risks their life to haul someone back from the edge of a bridge, to wrap them up in a Superman cape and a bear hug until the police arrive to make sure they have a chance at a right mind? That would be the same John Fillah, St. Cloud's streetcorner Superman, whose acquittal I told you about earlier. So is he in his right mind, or his wrong mind? Is he sane, or insane? The judge at his disorderly conduct trial had an easier time deciding the question of his guilt or innocence than we would of determining the state of his of either his mental health, or his demon possession, however you choose to view it.

It would be a tragic mistake to label as Legion only those who meet John Fillah's description, or the drug addicts, or the homeless who walk the street talking to themselves, or the children begging for money at streetlights. It is not only for all those at the psychiatric hospital, or in the prisons, or in gangs. Yes, all those people are Legion, but so are you and I every time we act out our wrong mindedness, when our selfishness rises above our selflessness, when our experience of grace only extends to ourselves, when we fail to celebrate what's right with the world, and mire ourselves in what's wrong with poor little old me. You see, we are all a little mentally ill, we are all a little demon possessed; this we must believe, unless we are willing to admit that demons or delusions were responsible for a bridge jumpers rescue. And if we do not believe that Legion's story is our story, we will never find ourselves sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in our right minds. Amen.