

June 19, 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Psalm 22:19-28; Luke 8:26-39

by [LaDonna Sanders Nkosi](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue

Many people are bound. Some are bound and don't even know it. Anxiety, fear, unforgiveness, anger, bitterness, disappointment, distraction, memories of the past—all these things can affect a person's perceptions, experiences, and quality of life.

On a recent mission trip to South Africa, I encountered these words from the late president Nelson Mandela: "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

The difference between being free and being bound is at the center of our Gospel text this week. Jesus goes to the land of the Gerasenes and is met by a man who has demons, so many that the name of the spirit is Legion. The man has to be bound with chains and shackles—and when he breaks his chains, the demons drive him into the wilderness. It is as if the man were behind actual prison bars: he is isolated from family, community, and society.

The parallel text in Mark 5 adds that the man "had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones" (vs. 4-5).

By the time this man meets Jesus, he has been suffering a long time with these demons, living in the tombs, away from everyone, alive but living in a dead place. When he encounters Jesus, he is set free. It is as if his cries in the night have been answered. God's son comes to him by boat, and this encounter provides his deliverance.

The psalm for this week, Psalm 22, is like a soundtrack in the background of this man's life story. It is a lament crying out in prayer: "But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid." As in several others stories from the Gospels, it is as if Jesus comes to this region just for this person, just to give him deliverance, healing, and freedom.

It is not popular in many circles to talk about demons, demonic possession, and deliverance. Yet it's a central area of Jesus' ministry: he encounters people who are bound, and he sets them free—even and especially from devils, demons, and unclean spirits. It's central to how Peter describes the Gospel message in Acts 10: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power . . . he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (v. 38). At the beginning of the chapter from which this week's Gospel text is taken, Jesus is accompanied by the 12 disciples and certain women "who had been cured by evil spirits and infirmities." These include Susanna, Mary Magdalene—out of whom seven demons have come—and many others (8:2).

The people who are instrumental in Jesus' ministry have been healed, set free, and delivered through their encounters with him. In our own day, many people are like the man in this week's Gospel text: they are oppressed or imprisoned by demons or spirits that keep them from operating to their fullest. What, according to this story, does freedom look like?

First of all, true freedom requires surrender to Jesus. When the man sees Jesus, he falls down before him. Often we don't know, or don't acknowledge, that we are bound. We may be able to identify other people's demons or places of bondage; we may even be able to call out systemic or societal ills and spirits. But we are prevented—by arrogance, by fear of shame, or by the masks we wear—from coming to Jesus and surrendering our whole hearts and selves to deliverance from the things that keep us bound. When the man falls down before Jesus, it is an acknowledgment of the power of God in him. This is a key to full freedom.

Second, freedom means being restored specifically to community. When the man was bound by demons, he existed in isolation. After he encounters Jesus, he is commissioned for service among his people: "Jesus sent him away saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him."

When the woman at the well encounters Jesus in John 4—a woman who is isolated from her community due to her marital status or lack thereof—Jesus not only restores her dignity and personhood but sends her back to preach the good news as an evangelist in Samaria. Likewise this man, once occupied by a legion of demons and living in the graves and in the mountains, is sent back to his home to declare what God has done. In the background, in the soundtrack of his life, Psalm 22 echoes: "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the

congregation I will praise you.”