

June 19 2016

Scripture Lesson

Psalm 42

Sermon "The Bus Ride"

“What got into me that I should have done that?” You ask that question as you look back on some foolish act. “What got into me?” What possessed me? This question which we ask casually caused people of an older time to shudder with fear. They took it literally. When they said, “What got into me?” they had a very literal answer. Something out there caused me to do that. Even today, we speak of something other than ourselves when we try to shift responsibility from ourselves. You remember Flip Wilson used to quip, “The devil made me do it!”

There is a strange story in the gospels of Mark and Luke, a story that is a bit frightening.

Luke 8:26-39

One day Jesus was confronted by a man who was thought to have an unclean spirit, a man who lived among the tombs. “Night and day among the tombs...he was crying out and bruising himself with stones.” Something had gotten into him and Jesus had bid the evil spirits come out. The man had answered, “Do not torment me.”

“What is your name?” Jesus had asked, and the startling answer from the man was this: “My name is Legion, for we are many.” (Mark version) The story ends with Jesus casting those spirits out, and the man restored to right mind again.

Now in all candor, we scoff today at some of these ancient ideas. Demons? Evil Spirit? In our sophistication, we know better ways to describe and explain the forces that control us. We speak of schizophrenia and paranoia, of neuroses and psychoses, and the only absolute certainty is that people of faith and of science 500 years from now will laugh at our terms, just as we scoff at the terms used in the ancient world. The terms are finally unimportant. What matters is that we lost control of ourselves, you and I do, that something does, indeed, seem to get into us and troubles us, In an awareness that if we could understand ourselves we could live more responsibly, we focus our attention on that goal this morning:
understanding ourselves.

Let me share a concept that has been helpful to me as I try to understand what goes on back in the hidden corridors of my mind. I don't know who first came up with this approach. It may have been a preacher from years back, or a psychologist more recently, but I acknowledge that I heard Dr. Eugene Brice give a similar

sermon about 20 years ago at University Christian Church in Ft. Worth. His sermon has struck in my mind for years. I don't know the first source, but here's the way it goes.

Picture yourself on a bus load of personalities speeding down the road of life. You are your own bus. You are not on the bus, you are the bus. I am my own bus. And with each of ride different expressions of ourselves which sometimes seek control. At different times, under different circumstances, different people on our bus take turns occupying, or trying to occupy, the driver's seat. It is not so much that "something gets into us," or that "something possesses us," but that one of the lesser known persons we inside somehow gets to the wheel and starts driving.

Now some of the time, I'm like a bus load of kids going to summer camp. The goal is clear, and all the passengers want to go to the same place, so there is singing and harmony aboard. But not all the times are that neatly aimed, and to understand myself, I need to be aware of who's aboard the bus.

...Let me call the roll for myself, and as I check my passengers, see if some of these ride on your bus as well. Don't be surprised at who is aboard. Frederick Nietzsche one made the observation about his fellow Germans: "The German soul has corridors: caves, hiding places, dungeons; the German is acquainted with the hidden paths to chaos." Nietzsche was not describing only Germans, but all of us. Consider who is aboard your bus.

...Riding back in my bus and occasionally taking the wheel is a person who would frankly like to don scarlet robes ride around in a Pope mobile, with arms waving and people cheering. But also inside, sitting near the back is a person who is painfully shy, who wants to have a rear seat and not be noticed, and sometimes circumstances force him up front at the worst times, and his clammy hands and a trembling voice that emerge.

...Sometimes kindly old Marcus Welby gets to the driver's seat, and I am friendly and unbearably helpful, and am puttering around in other people's lives finding ways to help them, whether they want help or not. But I confess. Clint Eastwood slouches back there, too, and sometimes he swaggers up and takes the wheel, and the bus careens madly and Sandy smiles at my efforts to be manly.

...To my repeated surprise, I find that my Dad is back there among the passengers, and from time to time out of not really forgotten past, HE gets the wheels, and he drives just like he always drove, and in the way I walk, or think, or talk, it's him, not me, and I struggle to regain the wheel.

Sometimes a glum person elbows his way to the front and sits morosely down in the driver's seat. There's no apparent reason for his moodiness, and the other passengers can't understand him, but this passenger is always in a bad mood, and he drives stubbornly through the worst parts of town.

...Back in row ten is a person who recognizes the injustices of today's society, who has speeches to make about ugly racism and sexism and classism and militarism, and he lies awake at night and thinks of stirring phrases, but he's timid and afraid, and only occasionally gets near enough to the front to heckle the driver a bit.

...Sometimes the bus is hijacked and the other passengers sit in fear as a self escapes from some inner jail and says things and does things that surprise me, and I am terrified lest he wreck the bus completely. Some passengers I have never seen. I only suspect that they are back there somewhere. Sometimes I think I hear them, footsteps clomping away in the attic, but they don't ever come down, and I think I hear them crying in the night, and dreams become they escape from the attic of my mind.

And this what makes a church service so unpredictable for all of us. Which self was in the driver's seat when you came to church today? Who sits there now before God, your guilty self, needing forgiveness, or your discouraged self needing encouragement, or your proud self needing humility?

So many selves are here inside us! Sometimes a saint, sometimes a slut. Sometimes a clown with a painted face, sometimes a dignified business man or woman, a doctor or lawyer. There's a policeman inside here, and a judge, and a criminal, and a democrat and a republican, and a little boy who cowers in fear and still yearns for home and a mother's arms....How did the poor fellow put it in Jesus' story?... "My name is Legion—for we are many."

Most of us function effectively enough, as long as our more rational passengers share the driving, and we even manage to repair the damage and pay the fines when one of our lesser selves takes over. Trouble comes when the forces inside us riot in the streets, and we are suddenly disintegrated and fractured, with no sense of direction, and different passengers inside us struggle for the wheel.

Imagine yourself as a parent, a father. Today is Father's Day, imagine yourself as a Father. You drive home from work and there's trouble aboard the bus, with different passengers trying to drive. An angry passenger is saying. "You got unfairly blamed for something—get even" The hurt self is saying. "You don't ever get appreciated for what you do at work." The father person is saying. "Simmer down, your kids are going to need you." The husband part is saying, "She'll be there with her own set of needs, and I love her." And the internal banker says, "We've just got to stop spending so much money." So you arrive home, walk in the door, and the youngster says, "Dad, I need \$150 for a new baseball glove." And your wife says, "Honey, I work too, and I need help with the housework tonight" and before you know it, there's a surge in the bus, and hands struggle to get to the wheel, and you say...what?...What do you say? It all depends on who is driving...

Chances are, an hour later, the gentler self is wondering whatever got into you to say what you said and is making amends.

When the inner selves riot and fight among themselves, when there is an uncontrolled inner battle going on inside us, others always get hurt. The shooting may go on in here, but the wounds are suffered out there. The apostle Paul put it in terms we can all hear: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate...I see in my members another law at war with law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:15, 23-25)

And now we have come to the purpose of religious faith, for this precisely what salvation is: letting Jesus Christ take over these many selves, and bring an end to the civil war within us.

Halford Luccock, a famous preacher of many years ago, said, "There are many persons in me, pulling in opposite directions, many clamorous voices in the town meeting of my mind, with no gavel in the hands of a powerful chairman to bring them to order." (Interp. Bible, vol. 7 p. 715)

And that is what Christ, our chairman, does for us! He does not cast out these many selves that we are—he brings them to order. These many selves are God-given, and they create the richness of human life, its texture, its depth, its diversity. But Christ reminds us that we, finally, are in control of all these passengers on our bus, and that we can decide who drives, and when. We decide when we are gloomy, and out of sorts; we decide when we live selfishly; we decide when we reach up grandly for something high and noble; we decide who drives! And how do we do it?

And old country preacher was once asked what it felt like on the inside to be a Christian. He silently thought on the subject, and then said, "Well, it's sort of like I've got two dogs inside me. One is a good dog, and the other is a bad dog, and they're always fighting" The questioner asked, "Which dog is winning the fight?" The old preacher answered, "Whichever one I say sic'm, to."

Do we say sic'm to the wrong impulses within ourselves? Do we call forth our darkest characteristics of meanness, ugliness or despondency at inappropriate times? Few of us have not.

A poet caught that in these lines:

There are two natures in my breast;

One I love and one I hate:

The one I feed will dominate.

Then it becomes a matter of which one we feed, and who we let control our lives. When accept the direction of Jesus Christ, it means an end to that civil war inside us, and from out of the tombs we come, out to wholeness, and out to life.

