

Wounds of the Soul: Spirituality and Paths to Healing. A Look at Luke 8:26-39 in the Light of Isaiah 43:1 and John 4:10 ff.

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My name is Dieter Brandes. I am a Lutheran pastor and was responsible for Healing of Memories processes for about a decade, first in Eastern Europe and later in Central Africa on behalf of the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.

At least in the processes in Central Africa, it became clear to me in processes in Rwanda, Burundi and DR Congo, for example, that by working in for Healing of Memories processes, a confrontation with traumatic wounds cannot be ignored.

Dear colleagues, today I am talking about Wounds of the Soul and the profound connection between spirituality and ways to heal Wounds of the Soul. Exegetically, I am referring to the story of the healing of the possessed man according to Luke 8:26-39 with an expanded context of Isaiah 43:1 and John 4:10 ff (-30)

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1. Luke 8, 26-39

The story of the healing of the possessed man is also reported by Matthew (8:1-34) and Mark (5:1-20). I will concentrate on the Luke version

I will briefly read some parts from Luke 8:26-39:

26 They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes,[^b] which is across the lake from Galilee. 27 When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" 29 For Jesus had commanded the impure spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

30 Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him. 31

And they begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.

32 A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission. 33 When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

38 The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

2. A man possessed by inner demons lives among the tombs

We meet a man from Gerasa who is possessed by demons. He has his dwelling 'in the tombs'. (Luke 8:27, Mark 5:3) The fact that 'he dwells among the tombs indicates that he is closer to the dead than to the living'¹, as cemeteries are unclean according to Jewish opinion, the possessed man leads an 'existence without God that has become inhuman'².

¹ François Bovon *Das Evangelium nach Lukas Bd. 1Lk 1,1-9,50*, EKK, Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (EKK) 3,1, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1989, p. 434.

² Ibid.

However, it is not only his personal decision to keep his distance from other people, but 'it is obviously his violent states of excitement and uncontrolled outbursts of emotion that drive him into isolation'³.

This remains completely incomprehensible to his fellow human beings. They try to calm him down with coercive measures - 'bound with shackles and chains' (Mark 5,4 / Luke 8,29), 'but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert (Luke 8,29).

But the possessed man alone cannot free himself from this world of self-isolation; he has become homeless.

To understand this story, it is important to respect that the demons are not simply external forces that torment the man but have also become part of his identity. But these demons have taken away his humanity, his community and his self-image.

Jesus now meets him with a radical love, respects him as he is and addresses the demons as part of the possessed man's identity in which he is trapped.

3. Identity and Healing

According to Drewermann, the following question posed by Jesus about the name of the possessing spirits could be seen as a psychotherapeutic process.

With his illness, the possessed person has formed a system of cycles and mechanisms that stabilises [his mental illness] and stands in the way of its resolution'⁴.

Jesus now interrupts this cycle by not marginalising the world of the possessed person, which is filled with foreign images, as other people have done, but by taking it seriously and asking 'What is your name?'

Perhaps for the first time in a long time, with Jesus someone has come who does not marginalise him, but is interested in his person as he is

'What's your name?' means something like 'Please, tell me how you are. How do you feel? ... How did it come about that you feel this way? ... Who were your parents, how did they try to bring you up?'⁵

³ Eugen Drewermann *Das Lukasevangelium Bd.1, Lukas 1,1-12,1*, Patmos Verlag Düsseldorf 2009, p. 560.

⁴ Eugen Drewermann op.cit. p. 563.

⁵ Eugen Drewermann op.cit. p. 564.

This brings Isaiah 43:1 into focus:

‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name’.

These words remind us that our true identity does not lie in our wounds or in what holds us captive, but in being carried by God - as a full member of the community of people in God's creation.

By being unconditionally embedded in the human community and God's creation, the possessed man experiences a *first spiritual healing step* on the path to a new human freedom - back to an identity as a beloved child of God.

4 The sending of the demons into the sea

It is remarkable that the demons ask Jesus ‘not to command them to depart into the αβυσσ’. (Luke 8:31) The αβυσσ is the realm of the dead or the place of oblivion.

Drewermann again argues as a psychologist: ‘It is impossible to dissolve the inner turmoil of this person into nothing, so to speak.’⁶ This is because the reference to the underworld (αβυσσ) refers to the place where ‘the enemies of God are held’⁷ according to Jewish apocalypticism.

However, this would lock them away in darkness. But ‘no therapy can avoid expecting the client to deal with all the contents of the repressed, split-off and projected’⁸. Instead, they should be recognised and respected as part of one's own identity, because they belong to God's comprehensive creation, just like the world of the so-called rational.

A central moment in the story is the moment when Jesus sends the demons into the herd of pigs that fall into the sea. This action is more than just a spectacular act. On the one hand, it symbolises the man's liberation from the dark parts of his identity. On the other hand, although the sea is often seen as a symbol of chaos and disorder in the biblical tradition, here the incriminating aspects of the possessed man are sent into the water, which ‘in the Jewish and Christian tradition [also] points to the origin of creation’⁹ according to Genesis 1.

⁶ Eugen Drewermann op.cit. p. 566.

⁷ François Bovon op.cit. p. 436.

⁸ Eugen Drewermann op.cit. p. 563.

⁹ Keyword *Wasser*, in Gerd Heinz-Mohr *Lexikon der Symbole – Bilder und Zeichen der christlichen Kunst*, Eugen Diederichs Verlag 4. Aufl. Duesseldorf-Köln 1976,s.299.

In this way, the possessed man experiences a *further spiritual healing step*.

His burdening wounds of the soul are not simply negated. Then for this would erase a part of his identity. They are relegated to a place where they are available as acquired experience and, if necessary, can be retrieved to strengthen other burdened people.

I am thinking, for example, of the Blue Cross and Alcoholics Anonymous with their sharing of their own experiences of addiction.

Step 2 of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous is called :

‘We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity’.

Step 12 means: ‘After experiencing a spiritual awakening through these steps, we tried to pass this message on to other sufferers’.

The forwarding into the water also points to another outstanding importance of water. Because ‘Water is life. Water is the source of life, it points to God himself.’¹⁰ In John 4:10ff, Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the fountain and offers her living water. Like the possessed man, she is freed from his demons, the Samaritan woman also experiences liberation. The living water, that Jesus gives, frees her from her loneliness and shame. It brings her into a new relationship with God and with her human community.

5. The mission back to the original world of identity

At the request of the man ‘from whom the demons had gone out ... to go with him’, Jesus sent him away, saying: ‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you.’ (Luke 8:38f)

For ‘as long as someone avoids a certain contact, flees a certain bond, he has not yet completely resolved the underlying conflict’¹¹.

By being sent back to his original world, the man experiences a *third healing step*: he confronts the origins of his identity and can begin to understand the paths of his negative changes.

¹⁰ Heinrich Bedford-Strohm *Predigt: Wasser - Lebensdurst und Lebensquelle (Offenbarung 21,6)*, Sonntagsblatt 1.Januar 2018, Evangelischer Presseverband für Bayern e.V. (EPV), München; <https://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/glaube/predigt-wasser-lebensdurst-und-lebensquelle-offenbarung-216>.

¹¹ Eugen Drewermann op. cit. p. 568.

6. The connection between spirituality and the healing of wounds of the soul

Both stories show us that healing of wounds of the soul does not happen simply by removing negative influences. Jesus shows us a way to restore an identity, borne by God that accepts people without exclusion.

The formerly possessed man experiences that his own existence is not isolated but part of God's comprehensive creation. This is a central aspect in the healing process of emotional wounds.

The demons, holding the man captive, had become part of his identity. Jesus refers them with love and power to regions of the 'water of life'. The healing process leads the man back to his true self as a person loved by God.

Jesus invites those suffering from emotional wounds to grow on paths of spirituality and to send the dark parts of their own lives into 'God's sea of creation' in order to live in his love and truth.

Thank you for your attention!