Encountering the Gerasene demoniac in an American prison

Incarceration is a tomb. It beats death into people.

by Isaac S. Villegas in the September 27, 2017 issue

At the maximum-security prison, a correctional officer escorts me up the long, wide passageway that intersects with the housing units, the usual route to the classroom where I teach each week. As we walk, thick plexiglass and metal doors open in front of us and close behind us, operated by someone somewhere watching with cameras.

At one point all the doors around us clamp shut, and to our left another slides open. It's the door to the close custody unit, where prisoners are kept in 80-square-foot concrete cells, isolated from one another and from the rest of the population. They are let out for an hour each day to walk around in a recreation cage and are allowed three ten-minute showers per week. The close custody unit is also called the segregation unit; on the outside we know it as solitary confinement. The prisoners call it "the hole."

I stand with my escort as five guards walk with one prisoner—leading him, encircling him, monitoring his every move. He is in full restraints: wrists handcuffed together in front of him, fastened to a chain belt around his waist and shackles on his ankles. He is naked, except for what looks like a tight miniskirt made out of thin, white plastic—like a kitchen trash bag.

Our eyes meet as he shuffles by. He looks into me with a blank stare, a cold emptiness that, I imagine, mirrors the emptiness of staring at a concrete wall for 23 hours a day. An officer tells me that they are transporting the prisoner to the mental health unit.

Later that month I read the news that guards had been beating prisoners in the close custody unit. A small group of correctional officers would take advantage of blind spots in the facility—corridors and corners hidden from the surveillance cameras. For the prisoners undergoing this regimen of abuse, the only relief was to escape for a few days to the mental health unit, where they would be placed under the supervision of doctors and nurses who cared about their well-being. The only catch was that the prisoners had to convince the guards of the severity of their health condition—and to be convincing required the horrors of self-harm.

I remember the man, his shackled body and haunted eyes. When I picture him, scriptures about demons flash through my mind, biblical scenes where bodies are given over to possession by deathly powers, where lives are colonized by an oppression so overwhelming that the dehumanization becomes internal to a person's psyche. Physical torments become ghostly voices. The prison's chains and police batons and pepper spray are forms of bodily communication. They tell people that they are nothing, that they belong in the hole, that they are lower forms of human life than the rest of us, that they deserve to live in a solitary tomb. Prison beats death into people.

When Jesus sails across the Sea of Galilee to the Gerasenes, he encounters a naked man who lives in the tombs, among the dead, where he is tormented by demonic presences. He is a living corpse, reeking of social contamination. He is imprisoned by the demon's realm: "He was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles," says Luke's version of the story, "but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds" (Luke 8:29).

We do not know why the authorities locked him up. We are not told what he has done to warrant violent restraints. We are unaware of his name, his story, and his crime. We do know that his neighbors keep him close: in the city, under the supervision of guards. They do not banish him; he is not sent into exile. They hold him where people can see him. His visibility becomes what Michel Foucault calls "a mechanism of objectification"; this form of penal surveillance maintains "the disciplined subject in his subjection."

But sometimes the naked man escapes. He makes a jailbreak of sorts and spends time in the wilderness—to get away from the officers' torments and his neighbors' gaze. That's the routine: capture and escape, capture and escape—all the while objectified and subjugated, rendered criminal.

When he sees Jesus, the man bows down—an act of abasement and submission—and says, "I beg you, do not torment me" (8:28). The Greek verb for *torment* is *basanizo*: to subject someone to punitive judicial procedure, to punish or torture. We are in the semantic world of law enforcement, of judgment and punishment and sanctioned beatings. The man implores Jesus not to torture him because that's what usually happens to him when people visit.

As I remember the shackled man, scriptures about demons flash through my mind.

Elaine Scarry observes that captives who undergo torture soon experience everyone and everything in their world as a threat. "Everything is a weapon," she writes, "made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners." Jesus, however, breaks through the man's expectations of violence. He does this by asking the man's name (8:30), an invitation for mutual recognition; his human voice is offered without hostility or threat. According to Scarry, "the most powerful and healing moment" for victims of solitary confinement is when a human voice "somehow reaches the person whose sole reality has become his own unthinkable isolation."

Dehumanization involves the effacement of identifiers, rendering a person generalizable—a number instead of a name. Jesus knows that the man has a name. He's a person, a human being, deserving of respect and honor. So Jesus asks his name and therefore invites the back and forth of conversation, of mutuality. His voice solicits a relationship between "I and thou," as Martin Buber put it—the intimacy of dialogue, of acknowledging someone in the second person.

The chains mark the man's body as abnormal. They designate him as a disease to society; they signify his status as a political contaminant, as pollution to the health of their community. The shackles declare his nature and prescribe how others should interact with him—or, rather, they warn people *not* to interact with him, not to engage him as a fellow human being. The chains and shackles announce an ethics of negation, denial, and quarantine—the proscription of ethical encounter, ethics proscribed.

Yet Jesus refuses to heed the prohibitions written onto the man's body. To Jesus the prisoner is a "you," not an "it." The man is not an object but a subject, someone worthy of a relationship. "What is your name?" asks Jesus.

The man tries to respond for himself. But his body has become a possession of others, his own mouth in the custody of alien voices who overpower his ability to speak. Someone or something talks on his behalf, keeping the man anonymous and without personhood. "I am Legion," it responds (8:30). The voice speaks in the language of the occupying Roman military. The man suffers not only external subjugation but internal constraints as well—as if the chains press through his skin, the metal reaching into his body, gripping his inner life and crushing his thoughts. A whole regiment of dehumanizing powers has invaded his life, becoming internal to his psyche—spirits of oppression eating away at his humanity from the inside.

That's the nature of the demonic: ghostly presences insinuating themselves into a body, forces of subjugation, powers of domination and slavery. That's the spirituality of chains and shackles and handcuffs.

The man I saw on his way from solitary confinement to the mental health unit bore a likeness to the prisoner Jesus encounters on the Gerasene shore. A legion of demons was pummeled into his flesh with fists and police batons; the demons colonized his body. In solitary confinement he was handed over to a demonic realm—to institutionalized routines of torment—where he suffered dehumanizing punishment,

daily assaults on his body and mind. These assaults unmade his humanity; they decreated his nature.

Imprisonment becomes a form of dying. It makes people numb to life, to the aliveness of the world and of their own bodies. Luke points out that the Gerasene prisoner lives in the tombs (8:27)—his juridical confinement is associated with death. A student in a class I offered at the prison once handed me a story about his life of incarceration. “Captive to Death,” he wrote in block letters on the title page. The prison is a morgue; incarceration mortifies.

The prisoner I saw being transferred that day had been estranged from his own life by the regimen of solitary confinement. Demons had been beaten into his body, death pounded into his mind. “My life here,” George Jackson wrote from solitary, “is slowly becoming one of complete alienation.”

In *Solitary Confinement*, Lisa Guenther describes the “inert blankness” of isolated imprisonment. “The prisoner’s life has become the site of an emptiness,” she writes, “the animated world collapses into dead . . . meaningless existence.”

Jesus liberates the captive by restoring him to his community.

Guenther builds on the psychiatric research of Stuart Grassian, whose 1983 study identified secure housing unit syndrome and its symptoms. “SHU syndrome,” Guenther writes, “is more than a mental illness afflicting individual subjects; it is a social, phenomenological, and ontological pathology.” Prolonged isolation alters prisoners’ psychology by depriving them of human touch, of mutual recognition, of our dependency on one another to discern and navigate the world. “We rely on a network of others,” Guenther explains, “to support our capacity to make sense of the world, to distinguish between reality and illusion, to follow a train of thought or a causal sequence, and even to tell where our own bodily existence begins and ends.”

Without human interaction, people find ways to convince themselves that they still exist—to prove to themselves that the concrete has not consumed their flesh. “I found myself curled up in a fetal position rocking myself back and forth and banging my head against the wall,” one former solitary resident told Guenther. “In the absence of sensation, it’s hard to convince yourself that you’re really there.”

The punishment of isolation is ontological trauma. As Aristotle taught us, human beings are social beings. We are made and unmade through intersubjective

relations—the mutual recognition of a glance or touch. To segregate someone from others is the undoing of human nature. Isolated imprisonment shatters personhood, unhinging body and mind. The self disintegrates.

Restoration requires the prisoner's return to shared life, to our mutually constituted human condition. The health of our bodies involves fleshly affections. As intercorporeal creatures, the health of prisoners is bound up with our health, our daily lives bound up with theirs. The reintegration of the incarcerated man I saw involves his return to our communities, which entails the reintegration of our society, the healing of our social body. This healing begins with mutual recognition, reciprocal acknowledgment—to see one another as belonging together, living a shared life. Structures of imprisonment teach us to believe instead that prisoners are not part of us, not members of our collective body—that some populations should be quarantined for the sake of the health of our political body as whole.

There is a genealogy to our use of medical discourses of bodily health to describe a society, and these discourses have everything to do with designating certain groups of people as threats to the rest of the body politic. In the lecture series "Society Must Be Defended," Foucault tracks the modern state as it emerges from the 18th century as a biological organization, an institution deploying the scientific discourse of anatomy to describe a social identity—"a 'biopolitics' of the human race." The science of the individual body was translated into a political science "directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species." This science of the social body fabricated racial categories as a tool for social cohesion—and a political device for demarcating unwanted groups. According to this biopolitical logic, the health of the social body requires the amputation of infected members, the quarantine of contaminated parts.

Such diagnoses of the public require a theory of deviance, of disorder or disease. This, historically, has involved the racialization of the criminal, the association of racial difference with criminal deviance. "Once the mechanism of biocriminal was called upon to make it possible to execute or banish criminals," Foucault explains, "criminality was conceptualized in racist terms." The prison becomes the site of dismemberment, of ripping apart our social body on the grounds of mutual wellness.

After a visit to the Attica Correctional Facility in New York, Foucault likened the prison to "a form of prodigious stomach, a kidney which consumes, destroys, breaks up and then rejects." Incarceration eliminates people; it metabolizes them into excrement, social waste. The prison system's existence is a material polemic—an

argument in concrete block—for a rupture in the social body, a separation alleged for the good of the whole. And this whole has been racialized to mean the white population in the United States that has established its economic and political dominance.

In *Caught*, Marie Gottschalk notes that an earlier era saw more public involvement in the carceral regime, back when the prison population used to be whiter—back when Babe Ruth hit his longest home run in Sing Sing and Johnny Cash recorded his legendary album in San Quentin. In the late 20th century, when "the country's prison population went from being predominately white to being predominately black and brown," Gottschalk observes, "the general public no longer identified with people on the inside." She continues:

> The ability to identify with an offender—or not—is a key predictor of why people differ in their levels of punitiveness. The invisibility of the millions of people behind bars has made it extremely difficult to alter the negative portrait that members of the general public have in their heads of people who have been convicted of a crime. They are simply prisoners and criminals. As such, they often are denied their humanity and denied any right to democratic accountability, much as slaves were in the United States.

The penal system is a form of segregation, developed and sustained by racial visions for the public's health. Incarceration operates within a logic of quarantine, where the well-being of some is sacrificed for the health of others. Criminalized members of our community are sacrificed for the bodily integrity of society.

This system has made our lives unimaginable without incarceration. "On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted," Angela Davis observes in her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* "The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense," she writes. "It requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison." Our imaginations have been colonized, strangling our ability to envision a different world. The task of prison abolitionism, Davis remarks, is to restructure our politics so that we can begin to imagine alternatives to incarceration, to reengineer our social body in order to liberate our minds to see another future.

Jesus lands on the Gerasene shore and encounters the man imprisoned by demons. He liberates the captive through an act of healing that involves restoration to his

community. But as soon as the man arrives at home, he asks to leave with Jesus (Luke 8:38). He does not want to stay. His city refuses to celebrate his freedom; the residents do not welcome him. They see him, clothed and in his right mind, and they are afraid (8:35).

The people fear this healed man, now that demons no longer possess him and chains no longer shackle him. The liberated man sees familiar faces on the streets, memories of juridical trauma, the inhospitable gaze of the public. Panic spreads through the population at the sight of the unbound prisoner. Their sense of safety is unsettled, their lawful order disturbed. What guarantees that he won't relapse into delinquency? Once a demoniac, always a demoniac.

Jesus tells the man to stay: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you" (8:39). Jesus sets aside the community's rituals of discipline, its public safety protocols. He asks the man to bear witness to new possibilities, to liberate the minds of his people from the grip of the carceral regime—for his healed body and restored personhood to break open a new social imagination, a vision for being together without chains and shackles, isolation as punishment, or beatings.

The people respond by demanding that Jesus leave (8:37). Banishment is the will of the populace. The established order of their common life requires the continuation of their juridical structure and their justice—a complex of political arrangements that Jesus fractures when he returns the man from the tombs to the city. After all, the Spirit of the Lord has sent him to proclaim release to the captives. He performs this in the country of the Gerasenes, and it undermines the life the people there have created for themselves—their ordered stability and social cohesion.

To imagine life without isolation as punishment, to dream of a society without prisons, to struggle our way into a different world—this involves the shared risk of releasing incarcerated people into our neighborhoods and restoring them to our communities. It means seeking our wholeness with them, that we will become members of one another. This abolitionist commitment requires changes to our public policies. Gottschalk outlines the need for greater public investment in employment, housing, and education. Deincarceration demands a socioeconomic infrastructure, a web of livelihood to support the formation of a renewed community for all of us.

This is precarious. The abolitionist way of life opens us to people who have been habituated into cycles of violence—and restores them to their identity as our neighbors, like the man Jesus releases from the tombs and the man I saw walking from solitary confinement, his eyes possessed by unspeakable brutalities. Our lives depend on handcuffs and judicial violence and prisons that feel like tombs. Our penal society exists because, like the Gerasene residents, we have been seized by a panic. And demons feed on that fear, fortifying their institutions of punishment.

When Jesus enacts his commitment to free prisoners, the people ask him to leave. Whatever risks abolitionism brings us, what's at stake is nothing less than the presence of Jesus. "All the people of the surrounding country" asked him to leave, Luke reports, "for they were seized with a great fear."

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