

**“Sinners Anonymous: Powerless Over Sin”**

Good Morning. My name is Dan Selbo. I serve as pastor at St. Timothy's Lutheran Church in San Jose...and I am a sinner.

I'm here today to tell you a bit of my story. I have been struggling with sin all my life. From the time I was a young boy, trying to figure it all out, through my Junior High and Senior High years when I thought I had it (figured out), to my college days when I was on the front end of starting to find my way.

For as long as I can remember, sin has been part of my life. It has been a daily struggle and I'm still in it. It doesn't go away. Some days are easier than others. Other days are not quite so easy.

I actually thought (for a while) that it would go away when I went to seminary and graduated and became a pastor. If nothing else, I thought it would be simpler and easier to fight. In many ways, it is and it has been. In other ways (and new ways) it's still there.

When I became a husband and was married, almost everything in my life changed for the better. I've been blessed beyond measure with a loving wife, four children, and (most recently) with our first grandchild. God has been good to me and to us...but my struggle with sin remains. As much as I want it to stop, it just doesn't. As much as I want (and wish) it would go away, it keeps coming back.

I want to be honest with you today about my struggle, and I want you to know that (if it's yours), you're not alone. Even pastors have to stay after it. The guard goes down and the Deceiver is right there. It doesn't stop.

But there is one who can stop it and his name is Jesus. I've come to know that in my life, come to (know him) in my life. He can help. He does help. He's the only one who can really help. I need to remember that, every day. And (to do so) I need your help. We need each other. It's an ongoing struggle. Thanks for listening to my story.

And so begin the meetings in a wide variety of support groups throughout the country, (with a testimony) from people dealing with addiction. And so begins the season of Lent when we take a deeper and a closer look at our own lives. And so we begin a series today in which we'll be going after one of the addictions (in this life) we all face.

“Sinners Anonymous.” That's the title we're giving to this series. That's the way in which the next four Sundays will be framed. It's also a clear (and accurate) picture of what every Sunday is, in the church, when we come together as sinners, acknowledging our faults, confessing our failures, and being reminded of our ongoing (and every day) need for Christ.

For these next weeks, we're going to turn this sanctuary into an SA Group. We've all heard of (support groups) like AA and NA and (maybe even) OA. (Some of us might be involved in them.) We're all aware of the more open and obvious addictions that can control and do harm and (eventually) destroy lives. Countless people are caught up in struggles that have overtaken their lives and destroyed so much of what they have worked so hard to secure.

Families, friendships, finances, careers, relationships, possibilities and futures and the best-laid plans; there's nothing left when those addictions have their way in a person's life. There's nothing gained when those addictions destroy everything (in that life) that has been gained.

And the reality is that no one is immune. There's not a single person on this earth who is 100% free from the possibility that something (in some way) will take over and have its way; nor is there any people-group or demographic or social standing (or status) that is protected from the long list of addictions that can destroy. Every year, that's exactly what happens to millions of lives that are overcome.

As harmful and wide-reaching as those more open (and obvious) addictions might be, they are nothing compared to the one addiction we all face (and struggle with) and, (if we're not honest), that can and will destroy. It's the addiction of sin. It's the addiction that caused our Lord Jesus to go to the cross. And it's the addiction we're going to be going after in these next few weeks.

Today's story is one that sets the stage, not only for this series, for helping us see the reality of what sin can do and the grasp (it can take) in a person's life, but also for helping us understand what God wants and expects from those of us (in this life) who have been set free by the power of Christ.

It's the story of a demon-possessed man who was set free by Jesus. (You heard the story.) At the beginning, the man is a naked and a frightening and a hopeless case. By the time it's over, he's fully-clothed, sitting at Jesus' feet, and in his right mind.

He was powerless (in his life) over the demons that had taken control. He was controlled (in his life) by this sinful force that was driving his every move. And he was trapped, and there was no escape, and it was forcing him (and causing him) to escape from what would have been (and could have been) a normal life. But it wasn't and it never would be, because there was a force in his life that had (overtaken his life) and would not let go.

Now, let's stop for a moment and make the connection, if it's not already obvious. In our worship (every week), before we turn to scripture and to hearing what God has to say to us, we take time (in confession) to turn to God and tell him what's happening in us. The (Some of the more traditional) words we use (every Sunday) are not just words. They are an accurate description of the struggle we face.

Every week, we confess, "We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone."

And it's not because we haven't tried. (Be honest.) It's not because we don't care. We do care, and we have tried, and we do try, and we keep on trying, but it doesn't go away. Just like the man (in our story), we are powerless over sin. We are in bondage and can't get out. There's a force that has taken over and won't let go. And it's not going away. It won't go away. And it's not just us.

In the Bible, there is a long list of people who were caught up and controlled by sin, and most of those people are the (very ones) we think about as the heroes of the faith.

Go down the list. Abraham, before he became the father of a great nation, was willing to prostitute his own wife, because he concerned about (and afraid) for his life. (He was trapped.)

Moses, before becoming the great deliverer from the Pharaoh, was a murderer, caught up in sin. (He didn't know what to do.)

King David was an adulterer (and a murderer), even after having been chosen (and blessed) by God. Peter, as a disciple, (one of the twelve), three times denied even knowing his Lord. And Paul, before becoming an apostle, (the greatest apostle this world has ever known), was one the greatest persecutors of the church that ever lived.

It's the same story, everywhere you turn. And those are the stories of those who had turned and (who should have) known better, (and they did), but the addiction was still there.

It's interesting (in this story) of the demon-possessed man. In Luke's gospel, it comes on the heels of the story of Jesus calming the sea. Luke says that after (calming the sea) Jesus and his disciples "sailed to the region of the Gerasenes." And it was there that he was met by this man who (for a long time) had "not worn clothes and lived in a tomb."

The land of the Gerasenes; it was a region into which Jesus and his disciples had not yet traveled. In fact, in Luke's gospel, Jesus goes to this region only once. It says it was "across the lake" from Galilee. More literally, it says it was "opposite" from Galilee. It was "opposite" not only geographically, but spiritually.

It was Gentile country. In contrast to the places where Jesus had been traveling, among the Jews, this was a place where he had not been traveling, among the Gentiles. As a result, this was uncharted territory, uncharted waters (if you will) into which Jesus and his disciples had sailed. And it was there that Jesus met this man who had been demon-possessed for much (if not most) of his life.

Now, we don't make that same distinction (today) like they did (back then), "Jew and Gentile," but we certainly talk about those who are "inside" or "outside" of the faith. You know as well as I do that there's a Christian segment in our world today, a faith-community that gathers every week. There's also a worldly segment, a secular society that has no reason or desire to come together with those of us who do.

Back then, the Jews were a people "set apart" by God for the sole purpose of making his name known among the Gentiles. In traveling to this (Gerasene region), Jesus was giving his disciples a glimpse into where (and to whom) their mission would carry them.

Today, the church is a people “set apart” for the sole purpose of leading others to Jesus. And it’s no different for us today than it was back then. If we think (somehow) that the Christian life can be lived out in this one (or even) two-hours each week on Sunday mornings, we’ve missed the point. The Christian life is lived out in the 24/7 world (in which we live) once we leave.

Now, I don’t want to push this “church” and “world” (us and them) distinction too far. Many of the needs found in the world are no different from the ones found in the church. Insiders or outsiders, it doesn’t matter. We all stand on the same ground at the foot of the cross, and we all have the same basic and fundamental need when it comes to our relationship with God.

At the same time, (having said that), I don’t believe for a moment that it’s coincidental that the first time Jesus travels to this Gentile region that his first experience is with a man who is demon-possessed. (The message is obvious.) This world is filled with demons. This man’s (entire life) was controlled by demons. And not just by one demon, but by a host of demons.

When asked (in the story) by Jesus, “What’s your name?” the answer was “Legion.” There was a legion of demons that had possessed this man. He was so overrun by the demoniac that there literally was no escape.

In fact, (Luke tells us) the demons (were so real) that they begged Jesus (repeatedly) not to send them into the abyss. Instead, they begged him to send them into a herd of pigs that was feeding on the hillside.

And so, what does Jesus do? He does exactly what they ask. He gives (this legion) of demons permission to go into this herd of pigs. And then (it says), when they do, they rush down the hillside into the lake and they drowned.

Now, again, let’s stop (for a moment) and make the connection. I don’t know how you react to this story and its detail. On the one hand, it seems so out of touch with our 21<sup>st</sup> century experience. Demons and pigs and a man running around (half-naked); this legion cast into the swine and drowned in a lake. It’s too much of a stretch.

At the same time, (having lived) much of my life in San Jose, it’s not too (much of a stretch) at all to envision people who are possessed by powers beyond their control. In fact, if you start thinking about what that means, it’s the kind of thing we see all the time. The only difference is that we’ve given them other names.

We have no trouble talking about addictions and about how (it’s an ongoing battle) to stay away from those things to which we’ve become addicted. We don’t hesitate (for a moment) to talk about our fears and our phobias and about how they have the power to cause us to do things that we’d never (on our own) choose to do. And it’s an everyday occurrence to hear of people dealing with mental illness or schizophrenia or some kind of neuroses that has taken control.

When we hear (those things) we have no trouble accepting and acknowledging that they’re real. But demons? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Here in San Jose? In our lives?

I don’t want to make it sound like the things we (just mentioned) are the same as the ones this man in our story had to face. They’re not. They’re different. The demons in this man’s life were legion and they had taken control of whatever life he had left.

But to think that because we talk about our demons differently, that that makes them any less demonic than the ones faced by the man in our story? (Be real.) There are as many demons in our world today as there were back then. And just like (back then) they can and they do take control of a person’s life.

Go down the list. (And these are some of the more obvious.) Hatred is a demon. (We see it all the time.) Greed is a demon. (It has a way of possessing people more than they realize.) Jealousy is a demon. Envy is a demon. Lust is a demon. Hypocrisy and self-centeredness, they’re all demons. Racism is a demon. There are demons all around us, everywhere you look.

Maybe your demon comes in a bottle. We’ve already talked about this one. (For many people, it does, and it’s hard to beat.) Maybe your demon is found on a card table or at a roulette wheel. There’s a reason so many caught up in those addictive habits become depressed. Maybe your demon hangs out in a shopping mall, or on a porn site, or in that person at work (to whom you’re attracted) who’s not your spouse. Maybe it’s on social media. I don’t know.

Call it what you like. Give it another name. Pretend that it’s not real. The reality is that our culture is haunted and possessed by legions of demons. And the ones we’ve (just mentioned) are among the ones more easily seen.

What about some of those we don't so easily see? In the story (at the beginning), when Jesus confronted (what he thought) was one demon, it cried out, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" It was scared. It was frightened. It knew Jesus had the power to send it out. And it wanted nothing to do with this one who was the Lord.

What about today? Do the demons inside of people still react the same as they did back then? You bet they do. "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" (People say it all the time.) "Leave me alone. Mind your own business. Do what you want with me (in the church) but keep your hands off of the rest of my life."

Do you think that still happens? Do you think that same demon still exists? It's more real than we care to admit. It's more possessing (of all of us) than we'd like to think.

Paul says, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was never confused when it came to demons. He confronted them when he saw them. He knew they were evil and needed to be overcome. And so he did. He overcame them. He overpowered them. He cast them out of this man who was possessed and (in so doing) it changed his life. Ultimately, he went to the cross and overcame not only every demon we face, but the one and most overpowering addiction there is.

"Sinners Anonymous." For the next four weeks, that's what this (support group) is all about. Right here, in this sanctuary, an SA group, (every Sunday) in this place (we call) the church.

If you're not addicted, there's no reason to be here. If you are (and we all are), during this season of Lent, there's nowhere to hide. And that's OK. You don't have to. We're in this together. We're all addicted. Every one of us has a testimony we could share.

But there is help. There is one who can help. He knows your struggles. He knows the addictions you face. And he's good at what he does. He can help you face them and deal with them and overcome them. Don't go it alone. (Don't deny it.) We need each other. We all need him. You need him...and he's there.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we come today confessing our sin, being open and honest about the need we have in our life for you. We thank you for being there for us, not only to listen and to hear, but to understand and to forgive. Lord, help us to not deny the addiction we face. Help us to not pretend that the demons in our lives are not real. We ask that you would take them and deal with them and cast them out that we might, finally and fully be set free. Thanks for your help. Thanks for letting us be honest. In your name we pray. Amen.