

Jesus and the Gerasene Demoniac

January 26th, 2020

We talked about the parable of the sower and the seed last week, or the sower and the soil. Our job is to fling God's love and God's grace into the world and then let the Spirit do what She will do. The seed lands on different types of soils, and God brings the harvest. But there is another story tucked in between last week's reading and today's story. Jesus and his followers board a fishing boat and head to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. During a terrible storm, Jesus manages to fall asleep. And when he awakens to find the disciples obviously freaking, he calms the storm, and then he asks, Why are you afraid? Do you still not have any faith? Apparently fear and faith are at polar ends. Not fear and doubt in this story, but fear and faith.

It was a rough night, and the disciples know that they are now on the eastern shore, which is Gentile territory. This is a region called the Decapolis, the Ten Cities. They're not supposed to be hanging around with Gentiles. So they are already apprehensive. And when they step onto the shore, and are immediately met by a wild man with no clothes, screaming and shouting.

I want you to notice how much Jesus reaches out beyond comfortable boundaries. He steps out of the boat- where? Into Gentile territory, where he as a Jew is not supposed to be. Mark then says, "immediately a man out of the tombs"- according to Leviticus, you weren't supposed to touch a corpse, and this man had been living among dead bodies- so he is ritually unclean- "with an unclean spirit"- he not only has been living among the dead, but has a an unclean spirit within him- someone to be avoided. Jesus is on the wrong side of the lake, around a man who for two huge reasons they shouldn't be near. But Jesus says, I have the mandate and the power to be here, to free this man from his bondage, and to bring him back into the community. Of course he is here.

This man's neighbors had tried to restrain him with chains and shackles, but now it wasn't working anymore. He definitely couldn't live with them in town. He had destroyed their furniture, and threatened their children. So he had been cast out into the graveyard. By the way, this wasn't a nice, clean cemetery. This was open caves and corpses lying out in the open. This man spent night and day howling and

bruising himself with stones. He had lost his former identity, and he had been kicked out of the community.

So when he sees Jesus step out of the boat, this man runs and bows down to Jesus. And Jesus identifies what's going on, and says to the demon- "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" The demons know who Jesus is- James says in his letter- "You believe that God is one- good for you- even the demons believe- and shudder." (James 2:19) The demons believe in God- they just are opposed to God's ways. But they understand who God is. So the man, informed by the spirits within him, shouts out, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

Jesus wants more information, so he asks, "What is your name?" It's important to identify what you're dealing with. The spirits within the man say, "My name is Legion- for we are many." A legion was a large group of Roman soldiers, anywhere from 4-6,000 strong. The point is there is a lot of spirit activity in this man.

The dialogue between Jesus and these spirits continues. The spirits beg, "Do not send us out of the country." Do they want to stay local so they can invade somebody else? Do they not want to go down to the Pit?

Interestingly, Jesus agrees, and the spirits look around to see what might be available as a new home. Remember, this is Gentile territory, and they notice a herd of pigs over on the hillside. They ask Jesus to cast them into that herd of animals.

So Jesus honors this request, and he casts these spirits into these 2,000 pigs, which rush off the side of the cliff into the sea and are drowned. Now, we can get stalled here with the details. We can see the headline in the business section the next day: *Jesus destroys local pork producer!* And what's fair about that? I don't know if it helps to remember that he sends the spirits into the pigs, but they themselves run down the cliff and into the sea. Maybe that is too fine a point. That business is still destroyed.

And what about the environmental impact of 2,000 pig carcasses in the lake? My guess is the local fishing industry wasn't very happy either. But when we focus on

those other things, we miss the main point of the story- that this man who was in bondage has been freed- he can join the community again! And one of Jesus' signs of the reign of God is that people who have been ostracized are brought back into the community. All are welcomed and loved.

Notice in this story that Jesus asks for the name of the spirit. I said to the Bible study folks on Wednesday, I doubt that anyone Sunday morning will be in bondage to an evil spirit, but someone said, Yes, but what about bondage to an addiction, to alcohol or online shopping or pornography? What about bondage to fear? Bondage to a need for approval? That's a bondage where you try so hard to get people to like you. What about bondage to a resentment? Somebody did something to you and you cannot let it go. Each of us has something in our lives that is a chain around us that keeps us from freedom in Christ.

So Jesus asks the spirit, What is your name? It's important to name the bondage, because that's the first step in finding freedom. In fact, let's take a moment of silence, and I'll invite you to close your eyes and silently name that thing in your life that feels like a chain, that has you in its grip. (wait)

Some of you have worked the 12 Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The 12 Steps have been used for all kinds of addictions, all kinds of bondage- The first step says- We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable. The second step says, We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Because whatever the bondage that has us in its grip, the way we live because of that bondage isn't rational- it isn't joyful, it isn't life-giving. If you want to talk with me about what it might look like to work towards freedom in your life, give me a call. We could use the 12 steps together, or any number of ways to find freedom to work towards freedom in your life.

So this man is set free from his bondage. The pig herders run to tell everybody in the village what has happened, and everybody comes out to see Jesus and the man who formerly was possessed by spirits. And there he is, clothed and in his right mind.

And Mark doesn't say, They rejoiced at having their friend back. No, they are afraid. And they begin to beg Jesus to leave their community. I wonder if they aren't just afraid at the power Jesus displayed, but they wonder what he might do next. They had figured out a balance in their local lives. And now this man was supposedly healed, and the local business was gone, and they wondered what he would do next. One man's freedom wasn't worth local jobs lost.

I was talking about the climate change series that we are sponsoring the other day, and I said, I wonder if I would offer this series if I were a pastor in West Virginia where coal mining is king. Would we have the courage to offer this series if our members were coal miners and their families? Upton Sinclair once said, "It is difficult getting somebody to understand something when their salary depends on not understanding it." People have bills to pay, families to feed. Because if we wean ourselves off fossil fuels, jobs are at stake. If we leave fossil fuels in the ground, yes, there is the promise of jobs in the green economy, but there will be economic disruption. But we also know that there is already natural disruption.

Jesus frees a man from bondage, and there is a disruption in the local economy. I know that I am able to buy clothes at less cost because someone in a country far away from here may not be working in the best conditions. We are caught up in this global system where we are interdependent on each other. My lifestyle affects someone else's a half a world away.

So what do we do? In some ways we are in bondage to this global system. One of the things we can do is to learn the story of what we purchase, to learn the true cost of things, so that we can make just decisions. Our choices affect other people. Jesus frees somebody from what keeps him in bondage, and there are repercussions in the local economy. And the people say, It's too much. They beg him to leave.

But the man who formerly had the unclean spirits in him begs Jesus to take him along. He loves Jesus- this man has changed his life! He wants to be near him! And Jesus says, No, I have other plans for you. "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

Jesus implies, They don't like me here. I disrupted the economy. They want me to leave. They don't want to listen to me. But you grew up here. You have a relationship with these people. They had to throw you out of the community for

their own protection. Now let's see if they can integrate you back into the community.

And that's where the hard work is, by the way. The way Jesus often brings healing to us is through the community. When a young John Mark, perhaps the author of this gospel, leaves Paul and Barnabus on the first missionary journey because he gets homesick, Paul says, I'll never take him on a missionary journey again. Barnabus says, Come along with me. Someone else in the community brings healing to a young John Mark with a wounded spirit. Jesus says to the man, Go back to the community.

When Paul writes his letter to the church in Philippi, he urges two women in the community to get along. They have been disagreeing. And he urges another leader in the community to help them get along. We can be hurt in the community, yes, but the community is where we can also find healing. Jesus says to the former demoniac, Stay with this community. You have a story to tell.

Now, it would be interesting to come back in six weeks to this town and see how it's going. A friend of mine has a spouse who watches a show called *Homestead Rescue*, about a man and his two adult children who help folks who are struggling to homestead. They spend time with them, and teach them skills. And then they come back to that homestead six weeks later to see how they are doing.

It might be interesting to come back to this village in the Decapolis six weeks later to see how this man is finding community again. Do they blame him for the loss of the pigs? Are they welcoming him back into their homes? Have his wife and children reconciled with him? His life has been changed by Jesus, but now they have the hard work of working out the details of life in this next chapter.

That to me is a powerful witness to the world. It's not the witness of the church getting along all the time, and singing *Kumbaya*. The question is what happens when we hurt each other, when we do things that frustrate each other, when we disagree, when somebody wasn't there when we needed them. It is an even more powerful witness to the world when we can work our way through the hurt and forgive each other and walk side by side again.

Jesus says to the man, Go back into the community. Go back to your friends; go back to your family. That's where the hard work happens. If the man had just moved on and travelled with Jesus, he would not have had the chance to be welcomed back into the community. The community wouldn't have had the chance to work through their grievances and get to the other side. But that's when God has a chance to bring reconciliation. Let us pray. God, you bring healing to our lives in many ways, and sometimes it is through the reconciling work we do in this fellowship of believers. Give us the strength to do that work, so that we can be a witness to the world of your grace and love and your forgiveness to us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

