

Sermon for Sunday, June 23, 2019

RIGHT HERE AT HOME

He was buried alive, this man of the Gerasenes. He was alive, but the townspeople had confined him to the graveyard among the tombs. No doubt he suffered from some form of mental illness, and that illness so frightened the town's folk that he was kept under guard, stripped naked, and chained. In fact so violent were his psychotic episodes that he would sometimes break free of his chains, escape the graveyard, and terrorize the neighborhood with his wild ranting and raving. His plight brings to mind our old insane asylums, which were of course, prisons for the mentally ill.

Many mental illnesses are treatable today. With medications we help countless people cope with chronic depression, for instance, and live normal lives: doctors, teachers, accountants, pastors. But others it seems are possessed by a legion of demons. What afflicts them is difficult to manage. Regular living proves overwhelming or dangerous, and finally for their own well-being, but also for ours, we remove them from normal society and house them in institutions designed to cope with the symptoms of their diseases more effectively. Still, our objective in such cases is to "manage" them and their illness. Their lack of self-discipline frightens us. With cures evading our research we are still primarily concerned with controlling these tormented souls. The Gerasenes controlled the demoniac by keeping him in the village graveyard. Can you imagine!

Jesus always seems to find those persons who have been separated from the community. Luke tells us story after story of how Jesus encounters someone who lives outside the covenant community, removes the barrier that separates them, and then sends them back home where they've longed to be.¹ Sin is that which separates us from God and from each other, and Jesus forgives sin. So for Luke especially, Jesus' ministry is one of forgiveness, healing and restoration.

The remarkable thing about Jesus is that because of his great faith in God, he is not afraid. And because he has no fear of being ritually contaminated by the impure, like prostitutes, tax collectors, and the mentally ill, because he has absolutely no fear of becoming an outcast himself, he is able to minister along the margins of society where some have been pushed aside. There he finds lepers hiding, the blind begging, the possessed raging, and the sinful cowering. The gift Jesus brings them—call it salvation—is restoration into the heart of the community of humankind.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is yet another of these healing, restoration stories. It's exceedingly peculiar. But that may be, in fact, the very point of the story. When things don't make sense, like mental illness, we approach them cautiously, because what we don't understand, we fear. In large part, this is a story about fear, our fear, the fear of the townspeople, the fear that creates the separations that Jesus came to overcome.

The most interesting and startling feature of this story, is the reaction of the townspeople, when they come to the place where Jesus is, and find the former mental patient sitting calmly and normally at the feet of Jesus. They have already heard an account of the healing from the swineherds. They are not amazed, as one might expect. They are not grateful, as one might assume. They are afraid. They are, in fact, so afraid, that they ask Jesus to leave their neighborhood at once.

Why? Why are they afraid of Jesus? Could it be that they are like the demons who possessed the demoniac, afraid of being tormented by Jesus' presence? Could it be that in the presence of Jesus' faith and holiness, they know their sins will show up like scarlet? Could it be that in the shadow of Jesus' immense trust in God, their faithlessness was revealed to them? Under such circumstances, the demons that they knew, and understood, and controlled, were preferable to the holy presence they did not know, did not understand, and could not control, so they sent Jesus packing. In a similar way, later on, the people would crucify Jesus to try and get him out of their neighborhood for good.

To stand in the presence of God can be a terrifying experience if you think of God as the one who judges and condemns the unworthy. But if, through an encounter with Jesus, you know God as the one who

¹ Mary W. Anderson, in *The Christian Century*, June 3-10, 1998, p. 573.

forgives, heals and restores, then like the demoniac, you are able to sit calmly at his feet, ready to hang on his every word.

Well, Jesus, knowing he is not welcome, and with his “shake the dust off your feet” approach to evangelism, gets back into the boat without a word and prepares to set sail. Then it happens. The man once possessed by a legion of demons, whom Jesus has healed, and who sits at Jesus’ feet to learn from him, asks if he can go with him. Consider his options! He is standing on the beach with Jesus, with the disciples in the boat in front of him and the townsfolk who banished him to the graveyard behind him. He wants to go with Jesus! He wants to go with the one who healed him, with the one who wasn’t afraid to come near to him, with the one who didn’t walk on the other side of the street. He wants to go with his new teacher and Lord and learn more about the kingdom of God. He’s ready to be a disciple. He’s ready to follow Jesus. There’s room in the boat, and he’ll gladly leave without looking back.² There is no one behind him he’s interested in saying goodbye to. Besides, if they are kicking Jesus out of town what are they likely to do to him? He’s afraid to stay. He wants to go. But Jesus says no.

To some along the way Jesus issues the invitation, “Come, follow me.” But to this one he says, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” It’s a reminder that we are healed by Jesus not simply for our personal gain, but to serve; that this isn’t just a story of a man’s healing, but of his call to minister in Christ’s name. Jesus does bid the man to follow him, but in this case following means proclaiming the gospel in his hometown. Those very people who feared him, who shunned him, who shackled him, and who banished him are now his congregation. And who better to speak to them of new life, than the one whom they condemned to living with the dead? Who better to engage them in honest dialogue about the nature of fear, about the demons that assail them, and about the healing power of Jesus Christ? Who better than this walking, talking, breathing reminder of sin, both his and theirs, to coax them to embrace the courage of faith? And according to Luke’s one-liner at the end of the story, the man fulfills his task and does it well.

I have always admired those whom God calls to serve in the mission field, like Karla Koll and my grandparents. It seems to me to be an especially noble call, to give up the security and familiarity of one’s native land to preach the gospel to strangers. But in truth we are all called to serve in the mission field, even if it’s the mission field of our hometown, and to preach the gospel to strangers, even if they speak our language and live next door. In fact, the latter may be the more difficult assignment. It’s easy to be courageous and bold about the faith in a strange place where you are not known, and aren’t expected to stay. The really tough place to be in mission is on our own street, to our neighbors, among our friends, and in our families.

Jesus though, has a habit of calling us to serve in the tough places. If we are homebodies, he bids us “Come.” If we are flight risks, he bids us “Stay.” Fear is not to be run away from, be it the fear of demons, or the fear of judgmental neighbors, or the fear of new life. Fear is to be conquered with faith, with the perfect love and trust that God promises will cast out our fears. We are not saved by faith to run away, not healed of our sin to leave the community behind, and not rescued from our loneliness to live alone. We are saved, healed and rescued to be restored into the covenant community. The Gerasene man could not be allowed to run away. He had to face his fear, conquer it with faith, and serve as a living testimonial to the promise of new life in God’s kingdom. So he stayed home, and he served there, to the glory of God.

May we be so bold in our service. May we be so courageous in the expression of our faith. May we find the courage to address our neighbors and friends with the good news of Christ’s love, with the healing power of forgiveness, and with the incomparable benefits of living in the community of faith. May we demonstrate Christ’s love to our children. May we declare to others, to those strangers who are our friends, how much God has done for us. Because truthfully, when it comes to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, there’s no better place than right here at home.

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Luke 8:26-39

² Ibid.