

Pastor Jon's Sermon on Saturday, June 18, 2022. On Sunday, we did the bike to church worship with a Spontaneous Melodrama.

Tedt: Luke 8:26-39

We have officially entered the green season in the church. All of our lessons until Advent in December will teach us about discipleship... what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Today in our Gospel we have a miracle story known as the healing of the Gerasene Demoniac. This story is significant for us today because it shows how Jesus treats a man with a whole host of mental and physical health issues... a person who is considered a vagrant and lives outside of community among the tombs. He is considered mentally deranged and uncontrollable. He runs around naked. Not even chains can contain him.

We know today just by sheer numbers that the last two years have challenged our mental and physical health to a breaking point. If you are looking for a mental health counselor today, it takes several months to even get an appointment. We know from personal experience.

And whenever we talk about healing in our church, I want to caution you that we believe that our prayers and laying of hands work in conjunction with the God-given gifts of the medical community. And also, not everyone will be healed like in this story. Sometimes healing means acceptance or finding strategies to manage in the world.

In this text, let's first and foremost look at the geography in the story. Jesus isn't afraid to cross over the Sea of Galilee into Gentile territory to advance his mission. We know it is Gentile territory because of the pigs. Jews, like Jesus, would never own a herd of pigs. They were considered unclean animals by Jews. And yet, Jesus shows up among the Gentiles.

When Jesus steps out on dry land he is encountered by a man with demons... known as Legion. Legion means a heckuva lot. I don't think this is a term of endearment for the man. A legion is a unit of 6000 Roman soldiers. This man had so many issues going on that they called him Legion. When he saw Jesus, he got down on his knees and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me".

Did you notice that the man and the demons that possessed him knew Jesus by name? And they knew of Jesus' power to destroy them. There is cosmic a hierarchy going on here that puts Jesus on top of the hierarchy and all the demons under him. Jesus hears this request and then heals the man.

But what happens to the demons? They beg Jesus not to send them back into the abyss. The abyss refers to the realm of the dead or of Satan. The demons need a host so they then beg Jesus to let them enter the herd of pigs on the hill. Jesus obliges. And suddenly the pigs run down the hill into the lake and drown.

Then the swine herders, who lost their pigs and income, went into town and told everyone what happened to their pigs and the demon possessed man. When they returned, Legion was sitting clothed and in his right mind at Jesus' feet. Would you believe it. Could you trust that this man is healed and reformed? It takes a while, doesn't it? Luke tells us that they were afraid. They asked Jesus to leave them. They weren't ready to accept Jesus and his message... yet at least.

But the man who was healed, begged to hop in the boat and follow Jesus, but was told by Jesus to stay among his people and share his testimony. Jesus commissioned him as a local disciple. Jesus said, "Return to your home and tell how much God has done for you." A man who previously couldn't go home and was excluded from community is now restored.

Jesus' presence brings change to individuals and communities. For the community of the Gerasene's, Jesus altered the social standing of the now-healed man, the community's relationship to the man, the lives of the people who made a living from the pigs. Some of the changes aren't welcome. Embracing the changes that come with Christ's active presence in our churches and in our lives is the real work of living faithfully.

This story and any story that includes demons in the Bible should remind us of our baptism. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (3:27). We too are clothed with the power of Christ in our baptism. Our baptism is a mighty fortress that battles to keep evil at bay. In our baptismal liturgy, we adamantly reject the spiritual forces that oppose God, the powers and principalities of this world that interfere with God's will, and the "ways of sin" that would distract us from perceiving and fully trusting in God's promises and control. When we affirm our baptismal callings and renunciations, we are equipped to cast out the demons of loneliness, despair, bitterness, and oppression that exist in our own world.

This story should remind us that God is not afraid to enter into our geography... the thoughts of our minds... the chains that bind us... the communities that exclude. His powerful word can and will change us. We aren't always healed like the man in the text, but we enlist the help of medical professionals who God gifted to listen and help us cope. This is a story of God's presence and care for us, even when we are not in our right minds.

Amen.