

Observations of a Madman Made Sane

I don't know whether anyone noticed, but I made a big mistake in the sermon last Sunday. I got my directions mixed up. I told you that Jesus and his disciples were on the northeast side of lake Galilee and that they sailed to the southwest. In fact, they had been on the northwest side of the lake and they sailed to the southeast side. They were sailing southeast not southwest. Sorry for the confusion. The only thing I can figure is that I must have gotten turned around in the storm.

At any rate, when they reached the Southeast shore of Galilee, they met a creature that became the man whom I mean to portray to you this morning. His name used to be "Legion."

Fear, mistrust, paranoia, self-pity, self-loathing, depression, hatred, anger, malice, a desire for revenge, loneliness, lust, and longing; these were just some of the demons that had taken possession of my soul. I'm not sure how I got into the shape I was in, but I think it was a gradual decline. Some hurt, disappointment, humiliation, rejection, or perhaps it was one too many bouts of drunkenness that pulled down the dark shade of despair on my life, but at some point I lost it altogether, gave up altogether, became more animal than man. In fact, after a while I bore (no pun intended) a strong resemblance to the swine raised on nearby fields, except that I was a wild hog and completely uncontrollable. The only pleasure left in my life was the exercise of my power to frighten and to inflict wounds on others. Something inside of me was giddily glad when a well-aimed stone drew blood from an unsuspecting visitor to the cemetery. I had the same feeling when I could see that my image caused others to be afraid; I could smell their fear and it gave me quite a rush.

But mostly I was miserable. No matter how many times I cut myself, or bruised myself, no self-inflicted pain could rise above the soul pain deep inside. Nor could anything I could do silence the voices screaming inside my head. At first others had tried to help me, then they tried to control me, but nothing worked. I was driven by powers I did not understand but they gave me superhuman strength. I broke every chain they tried to shackle me with and used it as a weapon against them. Finally they just gave up and left me alone, which was even worse.

In a moment of unusual clarity I saw the irony in my life. I was like a dead man, living among the tombs, wishing he were

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dead, but too afraid to die. It's hard to believe now that a human being can become so lost, but that was my story.

Then something truly remarkable and miraculous happened. I could see the lakeshore from my home among the tombs and one day I saw what looked like a regular fleet of fishing boats heading in my direction, but they were not fishing. They were moving too fast for fishing, obviously intent on some other purpose. When the first boat landed and the first men debarked, my first thought was to give them a good scare and so I ran toward them in all my naked glory. My long hair and beard were matted, my teeth were black and half missing, my body scarred from old wounds and bruised and bleeding from fresh ones. When I saw the man leading the pack, the voices inside me went wild, arguing among themselves. Then one shouted as loud as he could make me shout: "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" Jesus said just three words initially: "Come out of him." I felt a horrible wrenching in my gut, like I was going to throw up but even more so. I felt like I was about to be turned inside out. The voices inside me were whimpering now like the beaten animals that they were.

Jesus asked, "What is your name?" The voices answered "Legion," for they were many. Knowing that they would have to obey His command, they begged for alternative shelter. Seeing through my eyes, they spied the herd of pigs grazing near by. "Please, let us go into the pigs," they pleaded, and He nodded.

How can I describe what happened next? I felt an awful rushing around within me, and then a pain like being slashed open with a sword. I fell to the ground and everything, and though I hate to be so graphic there's no other way to tell it, everything emptied out. But then I felt something I had not felt for a very long time. Peace--I felt at peace--and the peace led to joy. I began to weep and laugh at the same time.

Jesus motioned to His companions and they converged upon me, picked me up, and took me down to the lake and bathed me. I continued to weep and to laugh and they began to weep and to laugh with me. Then it turned into the most wonderful water fight you've ever seen. They splashed water on me and I splashed back. We frolicked in the surf like children.

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Finally, when I was clean, clean clothes were lovingly wrapped around me and I found that my mind was clear. My first thought was to pledge my loyalty to Jesus and to my new found friends. "Let me go with you," I begged. But Jesus had other plans for me. "Go home to your family," He said, "Tell them how much I have done for you--tell them about God's mercy."

As you might guess, it wasn't easy going home. At first they didn't know who I was and then they were afraid of me, but I think it was my four-year-old niece who broke the ice. Attracted by the peace and joy that still filled my heart, and seeing the glow on my face, and being too young to understand the horror stories about me, she threw herself into my arms and kissed me on the cheek. When the others saw that I wasn't going to eat her, their fear turned to wonder and they too approached me and opened their hearts to hear my story. Jesus knew what He was doing when He sent me home. It was so good to be home.

I've been telling my story to my family members, old friends and neighbors ever since. I tell anyone and everyone who will listen about the man who set me free. I'm telling you this morning that whether your personal demons be one or many, Jesus can set you free. He can do for you all that He did for me. You too can know peace and joy. You too can be restored to your family and friends. You too, can be a powerful witness to others. Just open your heart to hear Jesus speaking to you. Let Him turn you inside out. Obey His voice.

There is a bit more in our Scripture lesson this morning that is worth noticing. The demon-possessed man being healed by Jesus is the central story. It shows us Jesus' power to redeem the worst of us and to deal with the worst within us. It gives us hope for ourselves and for others. Even the mad Moslems, running around blowing themselves up in the name of Allah—there is hope for them—at least for those who are still alive. We need to pray and fast for their deliverance. The point is that there is hope for all.

The other thing we notice in our Scripture this morning is the reaction of some of the demoniac's neighbors. You will remember that when Jesus gave the demons permission to enter the pigs that they did so, and when they did so, the whole herd of swine ran off a steep bank and were drowned in the sea.

Mark 5:14-17 say, "Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man, and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region."

We learn several important things from these verses. The first thing we learn is that seeing a great miracle does not always translate into conversion for those who see it. Many reacted not with faith but with fear. It was easier to tell Jesus to leave them alone than to embrace the changes He would surely bring into their lives.

Some people yet today are so afraid of change that they would rather go to hell than to surrender to the Lordship of Christ. We need to make sure that this is not true of us. We must be willing to let Jesus have His way within us.

A second thing we learn from these verses is that the love of money can be a great spiritual snare and stumbling block. At least in some cases, the people in our Scripture passage who wanted Jesus to go away wanted Him to go away for economic reasons. Jesus' act of sending—or of allowing—the herd of swine to perish in the sea was offensive not only to any animal rights activists who may have been in the crowd, but it was also a great economic bust for the pig farmers. They were left asking each other the question: "If Jesus stays around, how much will it cost us?"

I won't try to soft peddle Jesus to anyone this morning. If you allow Jesus to stay in your life and allow Jesus to rule in your heart, it will surely cost you something. It will cost you your pride. It will cost you your prejudices. It will cost you your selfishness and self-centeredness. And, it will redirect how you use your money. Jesus once said that our hearts would follow our treasure so it only goes to figure that if Jesus owns our hearts, He will also own our treasure. If our faith in Christ doesn't impact our wallets, then our faith in Christ doesn't amount to much. We need to make sure that whatever wealth we have no matter how hard-earned, is not allowed to be our idol. We need to be in that place spiritually where we can sincerely say, "I'd rather have Jesus."

The third and final thing I see in our Scripture passage this morning is that more often than not the best evangelists are homegrown. In fact, the homegrown evangelist can be even more effective than Jesus Himself.

There were two reasons Jesus told the healed man to go home and tell his story. The first reason was that it would be good for the man and would help to complete his healing. He needed to go home to be completely whole. The second reason was that he, having been healed and delivered, was a better witness for Jesus than Jesus could be for Himself.

We must never underestimate how God can use our testimonies to reach family, friends, and neighbors for His kingdom. Those who know the "before" and "after" stories of our lives—if there really is an "after"—will desire to know more of our transformation, and some will want it for themselves. We need to hear the challenge: "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."

We need to pray for hearts willing to be touched and transformed by God's power. We need to pray for freedom from all forms of idolatry. We need to pray for the willingness and boldness to share our lives with others in a way that will help them come to Jesus. We need to pray.

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Mark 5:1-20

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