

“Liberating Power”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; January 26, 2020

Mark 5:1-20

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Some years ago, Javen and I used to visit a friend who lived in Lake Elmo. When we were almost there, we’d turn the car onto a road marked, “Legion Lane”. Without fail, we’d turn to each other and say one of the creepiest lines in Scripture: “My name is Legion; for we are many”!

Jesus isn’t going by car in his travels today, but he encounters a “legion” nevertheless. We read that Jesus and his disciples went to “the country of the Gerasenes”. This was Gentile country, the home of foreigners who were shunned by the Jews. It’s a place where no good Jew was supposed to go, and certainly no good Jewish rabbi like Jesus. It gets worse: the first person Jesus meets is a man possessed by many demons. Let’s not get too hung up on the demon-possession aspect of this story. In a pre-modern culture like ancient Israel, any number of maladies were presumed to be caused by unclean spirits who entered into a person and wreaked havoc on their life. I’m sure we’ve all had the experience of forces beyond our control invading our lives and tormenting us. That’s how I would think about the demon-possessed man in today’s story.

In any event, this man consumed by evil spirits would have been considered unclean by ancient Jews. And on top of that, we are told that the man sleeps in the graveyard, among the dead. Putting it together, Jesus and his disciples have arrived in an unclean land, where they have met a man possessed by an unclean spirit, and the man is living in an unclean place. This is the last place Jesus should be. “Which, when you think about it,” [writes preacher David Lose](#), “is where God usually shows up.”

Jesus goes on to cast the demons out of the man into a herd of swine, who then run off a cliff into a lake and drown. When the dust settles, we find the man sitting at Jesus’ feet, “clothed and in his right mind”. But rather than celebrating with this man that he has been freed from the demons that had plagued him for so long, the townspeople are afraid and ask Jesus to leave. After all, those swine that

jumped off the cliff belonged to someone, and now there's at least one farmer whose business has been ruined. Jesus is forcing unwelcome change in the local economy, so the people want him gone. What once was tumult within the Gerasene man becomes a great storm among the Gerasene people. They are afraid of the formerly possessed man as well as Jesus, because the man's healing means they must incorporate him back into society rather than leave him among the gravestones. It's almost as if they would rather the man stay ill, sacrificing his health to avoid the disruption caused when he's healed.

I can understand the reaction of the townspeople, because in truth our culture and community are accustomed to a similar situation. We have adjusted ourselves to living beside sickness and brokenness in people, accepting when those who are not well are pushed to the edges of society. How else to make sense of the person carrying a cardboard sign beside the highway? Where does she sleep? Where do her children lie down when they go to bed? I don't know, to be honest, because we don't have shelters to house everyone in the cold. Even if we did, emergency shelter is no fix for mental illness, poverty, addiction, racism, homophobia, and the other challenges that lead to homelessness. Instead of seeing those who live with such conditions as fully human and deserving of dignified homes where they can grow in health, lawmakers and a frightened public prefer to pass laws against loitering, resist affordable housing developments, and condemn those who are homeless to the unseen graveyards of tent cities, sleeping in cars, or couch-surfing.

Yet where do we find Christ this morning but with the outcast, healing him and challenging the community to make a place for him. We are called likewise to take concrete action that restores those who are estranged. We can perform acts of mercy to help, and we do: handing out food or money, raising money for the food shelf, feeding people in shelters, or housing people for a time in our own homes. But the calling of Christ leads us beyond short term aid toward true restoration, to creating a world where the homeless are housed, clothed and of a sound mind. This is the realm of advocacy for changes in public policy, for making the public investments needed to subsidize rent among those who might come up short on a monthly payment, for passing a bonding bill at the legislature with funding for enough new homes, and for other courageous solutions that truly match the scale of the problem. This will create disruption, to be sure: asking the wealthy to pay more, challenging developers to prioritize affordable units, fixing biases of race or class in housing policy, and asking ordinary people to do rabble-rousing things like being visible at meetings, attending rallies, or speaking with decision-makers. Some will say the disruption is too expensive, too discomfoting, or too slow. There *is* a cost for the healing of the community and the restoration of the wounded. But Bonnie Thurston puts it pointedly when she asks: "Are we more interested in 'business as usual' (our pigs) than we are in the power of God to deliver our disordered lives and the ones of those around us?" (*Preaching Mark*, Fortress Press)

In truth, our affordable housing partners at Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative point out that the costs involved will not break the back of Minnesota's economy. [Finland is already doing this on a national scale](#), practicing a "housing first" policy that gives homes to people who need them, no questions asked. They are seeing dramatic results, as people who are now housed go on to tackle the other challenges that are so much easier to manage with a roof over one's head.

I invite you to learn more about housing those who are homeless in Minnesota by joining our Edina Morningside group at the next Beacon Convening. It's this Thursday night at 7pm—you can RSVP with the Time and Talent slip in your bulletin. You will hear stories of people like the healed man in today's story, those who have been restored to the dignity of having a home, and who are reconnecting to community rather than being exiled from it. In 90 minutes, you will hear from experts in housing and local policymakers, learn what opportunities are before us this year, and where people of faith like ourselves can add our time, talent and treasure. This is what Beacon does, connecting people of faith to amplify the moral imperative that all people have a home.

The Convening is in Prior Lake, so we're not going among the Gerasenes. We won't have to cross the sea of Galilee, and we might not even drive along Legion Lane. Yet on Thursday night—and in similar opportunities with Beacon and other partners—we will follow Jesus to the margins, breaking down barriers of discomfort and alienation, building new relationships and community instead. That's where we will discover anew the healing, wholeness, and reconciliation that Christ offers, not only for those who are on the margins now, but for every person, including ourselves. Amen.