

Luke 8:26-39

HEALED AND SENT

When I was in seminary, I spent one January term as a student chaplain in a state mental hospital. After a brief orientation the first morning, each chaplain was given a key to his or her respective locked ward and sent on our way. I can still remember the anxiety that I felt as I turned the key in the lock, opened the door, and stepped forward into the unknown with very little preparation or training.

I remember meeting a woman, who called me “Captain” and wanted to wrestle with me, but I never gave her that opportunity! Another woman told me that she was the “WAWA” woman, and stated emphatically that she was the Mother of Jesus Christ. Another person was back on that ward a second time around for the same reason as before. Each time, he was driving down the highway and, in order to show how much faith he had, he simply took his hands off of the steering wheel and let the Lord drive the car; evidently, the Lord didn’t drive very well because the man landed in a field both times with his car on fire.

Reflecting on that experience I know three things for certain. First, I greatly appreciate and respect anyone, who feels called to do any type of chaplaincy ministry but especially state hospital work. Second, I know I am not called to do that kind of specialized ministry. And, third, no matter how mentally or emotionally challenged some of the folks were in that locked ward in the Austin, Texas state hospital, none of them could compare with the tormented man that Jesus encountered in the country of the Gerasenes.

It should be noted that Jesus stepped off of the boat and onto Gentile territory. Besides that, there were swine close by as well as tombs, which were not only unclean, but they were the abode of the dead. And, there was the crazed man himself - he was possessed by demons; he was naked; and, he had no home or community for he dwelled in the tombs. All of these factors made it a very unclean and a not-so-nice place for a Jewish rabbi to visit – except for the fact that Jesus was no ordinary Jewish rabbi! Jesus always seemed to be on the lookout for those who were sent away. He had no fear of becoming an outcast himself, and so, Jesus reached out to those who lived on the margin of society. He showed compassionate love and concern for the sick, the poor, the possessed, the homeless, and the sinful ones.

The demon within the man sought to gain power over Jesus by calling him by name: “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” As Jesus did so very often, he answered the question with a question of his own: “What is your name?” The demon was powerless before the Lord; he answered, “Legion” for many demons had entered the man. Jesus took control of the situation. The demons were cast out; they entered into a large herd of pigs feeding nearby; the demon-possessed swine ran down a steep bank into the lake and drowned; the pig farmers got angry over their loss of revenue; they told the townspeople what had happened and the latter came to Jesus and, with great fear, asked him to leave, to go back from whence he had come. And, by the way, the man, who had the demons in the first place, was healed and made whole.

Perhaps Luke told this story to the first century church to suggest that Jesus has the power to change the world. The demon gave Jesus his name as Legion for many demons had entered the man. Luke’s audience would hear and understand that Rome with its many “legions” (units of 6,000 soldiers), while it occupied much of the known world, its days were numbered. After all, God is forever making all things new.

Surely, Luke told this story to the Church – then and now – to proclaim that Jesus has come to do battle with all the demonic forces in our lives that inhibit life as God wills it. Throughout the gospels, we see the power of God at work in and through Jesus to overcome evil, illness, disease, demons, and even death, and to set people free so that they can be in relationship with God and each other once again and forever.

A certain man was addicted to alcohol. Week after week he spent his money on drink while neglecting his family of their basic needs. But then, the man met the risen Christ. In an instant, he was cured of his addiction and was set free to be fully present with his family. Some time later, he ran into a few of his old drinking buddies. They had heard he had “gotten religion” so they began to tease him and say, “Surely you don’t believe all that stuff; do you believe Jesus actually turned water into wine?” The man said, “I don’t know about that, but I do know that Jesus turned my beer, my wine, my liquor into food for my family, nice new furniture, and a vacation for the first time!”

Luke is telling us that’s what Jesus can do for us. The demon cried out that day, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” And, the good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ wants everything to do with you and me! He healed many who were sick. He touched the lepers and the lame. He raised up the dead. He exorcised the demons. He died on the cross for the sins of the world. He rose from the dead and gave new and eternal life to his followers on both sides of the grave. What Jesus did then, he can and will do now. He still heals us of our sins, defeats our addictions, overpowers the unclean spirits within us, destroys the threat of death, and sets us free to be in a right relationship with God and with others.

I think another thing that Luke is telling us with this biblical narrative is that the demon-possessed man wasn’t just healed; he was also sent! After Jesus had healed him, the townspeople came out and saw the man “clothed and in his right mind.” While the townspeople implored Jesus to leave, the healed man begged Jesus to go with him and follow him. However, take note of the fact that Jesus sent him away, saying, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So the man did just that; he proclaimed throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

At the beginning of this story, the man was forced to live outside of the community, among the tombs. By story’s end, he was restored to his right mind and a right relationship with God and his neighbors. Jesus was told to leave but this man was received warmly throughout the city and people listened to what the Lord Jesus had done for him. The man was both healed and sent, and he faithfully did his part in being used by God to bring the Kingdom of God to that part of the world. The good news is that Jesus draws near to us as well – not to destroy us but to heal us, to bring us back into a right relationship with God and with others, and then to send us. He commissions each of us with a job to do, a story to tell, and a part in his mission into the world. God, in Christ, has touched and healed us so that our name is no longer Legion; now, we are known by the name Christian!

Lauren Winner tells the story of Mary, who was a nice but sort of cowering woman. She had grown up in a very strict household where she learned as a girl that her sole calling in life was marriage. She did marry and, fortunately, she married a kind man, and she was devoted to him. Then, when Mary was 43, her husband died. Mary did not spring to new life after his death. On the contrary, she seemed to shrink. Whatever their relationship had given her – love, a sense of purpose, a sense of security, an identity – that was now gone. For about four years, Mary was a shadow of herself. Then, a woman in her church invited Mary to work with her in a ministry to battered women. During her first year of working with the women, Mary came out of

her shell and blossomed. She couldn't stop talking about all she had learned from the women she was working with, the women to whom God had directed her. Mary was exorcised of some demon of insecurity, a demon of doubt that had afflicted her. The battered women and the friend who invited her into the ministry were the agents of her exorcism, but Mary knew that the work really came from God. God healed her. God sent her.

Likewise, we, who have been healed of our sins and other demons, are also sent forth by God. The Book of Order of our Presbyterian Church USA reminds us early on that "The election of the people of God (is) for service as well as for salvation" (G-2.0500/3). Thus, it is not coincidence but the providence of God that calls us to reach out and feed the community (as we did last night) or to gather back here this morning to commission eleven of our youth and six of our adults to work side by side with our sisters and brothers at Forest Hills Presbyterian and, together, serve the poor and needy people of Brunswick and New Hanover counties in North Carolina – in the name of Jesus Christ.

Wherever we are, whatever we do, whether by word or deed, we are sent out to tell others what God is up to in the world and what Jesus has done for us. We can do no less. We, who have been healed, are commissioned and used by God to bring further healing to the world. We not only sit at Jesus' feet clothed in our right minds, we are also sent into the world to serve in order that all people might live in right relationship with God and with each other. When we go to work and live up to our name - Christian! – we surely bring glory to God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
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