

A Change of Heart, Not a Change of Scenery

June 23, 2019

Scripture: Luke 8: 26-39

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time, he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him 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" — ²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So, he gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. ³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So, he got into the boat and returned.

³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So, he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.



Last week, as we began our latest sermon series "Intervention", we were in the northern part of the kingdom of Israel, up in Samaria. Today we travel into the land of the Gentiles, to the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, to the region of Gerasenes. The story takes place in Luke 8. I invite you to open your Bibles to Luke 8 so that you can follow along and take notes. Our passage today begins with verse 26. Once on shore, Jesus meets a man possessed by demons. The man used to live in the city but now does not. He wears no clothes and he lives among the tombs, isolated and far removed from civilization. He has been possessed by demons for a long time. While you and I do not struggle with this specific malady, we all wrestle with our own inner struggles – our sins or demons, if you prefer. Like last week's story, where God intervened to set things right, today Jesus intervenes to set things right for this poor soul. Today, we will also see how Jesus wants to intercede in our lives and in the lives of others, also seeking to set things right. Let us pray...

As our story opens, Jesus lands on the seashore, where he encounters the man possessed by multiple demons. We cannot miss what is not directly stated. Jesus chooses to land here, in this isolated place, because it is where the man is. Jesus chooses to meet the man right where he is at. Jesus soon learns that their

name is "*Legion*" for there are many different demons inside this poor man. A full Roman legion would have 100 soldiers. You get the picture of what was going on inside this man's mind. In verse 28 we see that the man falls at Jesus' feet and the demons inside cry out to Jesus, "*What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the most high God? I beg you, do not torment me*"? The demons inside cause the man to fall at Jesus' feet, respecting who and what Jesus is. The demons also recognize that Jesus has power. They fear what Jesus can do. They beg to be spared any torment. In verse 31 we discover what torment would be – "*to go back to the abyss*". To go back to hell, back to the eternal fire, this is what they fear. And they know Jesus has the power to do this.

Seeing little options, the demons scan the surroundings. They see a herd of pigs feeding on the nearby hillside. Jesus is set to cast them out of the man – to intervene to restore the man to wholeness. From the legion of demons' perspective, at least the pigs would be a preferable option to the abyss. They beg for Jesus to allow them to go into the pigs. He relents. In verse 32 we see Jesus extending mercy as he gives them permission. In verse 33 we read about the impact of this decision: "*Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned*". Fearing the power that is standing before them, the demons choose to leave the man and they flee from Jesus. Just wrap your head around that for one minute. The demons know Jesus' power so well that when facing that power, they flee. The demons, though many, know that they cannot stand the power of God in Jesus. The demons would rather cease to exist, perishing as the pigs drowned, than to return to hell. Hold onto those thoughts for a couple of minutes.

What follows is an interesting exchange. Now, remember, we are outside of Israel, in the land of the Gentiles. This is not an area that would have been really familiar with Jesus. With this in mind, the story continues. The herders watching the pigs observe all this and they run to town and tell the people what has happened. The people come out to the tombs to see for themselves what has occurred. As they approached, they must have seen the pigs floating in the lake. And as they arrive, they find the man - calm, clean, seated at Jesus' feet. The man who had long been possessed by multiple demons, the man that they had seized and bound with chains over and over, the man who had broken free over and over, the man that had been driven into the wild – yes, this is the man sitting calm and clean and sane before Jesus. We read these words at the end of verse 35: "*And they were afraid*". Can you blame them?

The townspeople are filled with fear. Their eyes have witnessed the change in the man, their ears have heard the story of how this gruesome scene unfolded, and they are "*seized with great fear*". They ask Jesus to leave. As Jesus prepares to go, to get in the boat to return to the other side of the lake, the man who had been possessed by demons for years and years begs to go with Jesus. But Jesus denies him. In verse 39 we hear Jesus' response: "*Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.*" Go and tell what God has done for you. Go and share your story. Go and make disciples.

Let us pause for just a second and consider this: why would the man want to follow Jesus? If it were me, part of me would want to go home to see my family and my friends. That part of me could not return to life as I had once known it

quickly enough. But another part of me would be grateful. After so many years of being possessed by a legion of demons, a part of me would want to leave all that behind to follow the man who had just set me free. That is where the man is. Yes, he is grateful. Maybe he is ready for adventure or maybe he is ready to leave his messy past behind. All seem to be good reasons to follow Jesus. And Jesus' response? NO! Instead Jesus tells him to go to family and friends, to tell them the story of what the Lord did for him, and to tell of the compassion that Jesus had upon him. The man's grateful heart is revealed in the rest of verse 39: "*So, he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him*". The man is sent to the people who knew him best – his possessed and deranged best – not only to a new life but to a new direction in life as well.

As we think about this story and our place in it, we must begin by thinking about the struggles that we all have. The man was possessed by demons. The man was separated not only from his community, his family... but also from himself. At times, we are all held captive by our sins. The possession we experience is not usually constant, but it is always persistent. My proclivity to be judgmental or prideful or that incessant desire to have that extra helping of chips certainly does not rise to the level of demon-possession, but each time I struggle with one of these things I am creating distance between myself and God and/or distance between myself and another child of God. Your struggles may not with judging others or with your pride or with gluttony, but when we honestly look within, we all quickly discover that we all have struggles. Most of us have more than a few. Some folks are like the demoniac, struggles so great they have lost themselves.

When Jesus looked at the man who had been possessed by demons, he instantly felt compassion for him. Healing the man, restoring the man, was the only option. The same is true for us. When Jesus looks at us, he has compassion. With each of us, Jesus wants to intervene to bring to bring us back to wholeness, to completeness. Jesus wants to change the story line of our lives. In turn, when we, like the man who had been possessed by demons, go forth to tell our story of what Jesus has done for us, then we too can draw others into the story of Jesus Christ. Our changed hearts and lives are a powerful tool for witnessing. Our changed lives offer a potent witness to God's love and to what God can and will do to and in and for our lives. It is a story we must share.

For the demon-possessed man, a change of heart was what was powerful, not the change of scenery. Yes, it is nice to return to community, to see family and friends again. But what mattered was his changed heart. The same is true for us. When our walk with Christ gets better, when it grows deeper, we have a change of heart. We still live within the same family, attend the same church, work at the same place, go to the same school, play on the same team. Our scenery usually remains the same. But the change of heart, the deepening of our relationship with Jesus, is what really matters in our lives.

The change of heart, the deepening of our relationship, can happen in a number of ways. The deepening of our relationship sometimes comes as Jesus lifts us out of a difficult situation. The deepening of our relationship sometimes comes as Jesus allows us to live with faithfulness and conviction through a time of suffering. Sometimes the deepening of our relationship comes as Jesus

intervenes and redeems our past, allowing it to transform us into a new creation in Christ. And sometimes the deepening of our relationship comes as Jesus randomly places us in situations where we have the opportunity to respond with love and with radical generosity. When we are open to allowing Jesus to work in our lives, the sky is the limit. To illustrate one way that this can happen, I would like to share a story.

A group of guys were returning home from playing golf in rural Georgia. As they drove down a two-lane road they came up on a smoldering house. It was obvious it had burned during the night. Standing in front of the smoldering ashes was a distraught woman with a small child. The men were Christians, so they stopped the car and asked if she was okay. She said nobody was hurt but she had lost all she had. The men each pulled a few dollars out of their pockets and handed it to the woman and said, "God bless you."

They drove off in silence. After a couple of miles, the driver stopped the car and took off his golf hat. He turned to his buddies and said, "Okay, take out your wallets and give me all the money you have, and we're going to go back and give it to her." They emptied their wallets and one man even wrote a large check. The amount in the hat totaled over \$1,000.

When they returned, they found the woman standing in the same place. The driver got out and said to the woman, "We just gave you some money, but we made a mistake. Would you be willing to give me all that money back?"

The woman looked at him as if he was crazy, but without complaining she gave him the few dollars they had given her. The driver then added that money to that inside his hat and handed her the whole hat. Then he said, "We'll be sending you more."

What a great story about a change of heart. The Spirit worked within this group of friends to make a huge difference in the life of a stranger – the woman who was broken and lost and alone with her child. Sometimes the Spirit's work is done to lead us to someone in the world who is in need of God's love. Returning to our passage for today, we recall that Jesus chose to land in a solitary place so that he could meet the man where he is at, right there on very margins of society. This made me question: do I do the same? Am I willing to go to cross the lake or to go to the edges to find those on the margins? Going one step further, do we as a church go to the edges? If the answers to these questions are 'no', we must consider why. What keeps us from reaching out, from going across whatever it is that we see as a lake, to minister to those on the edges?

The work of the Spirit is most often done within you and within me. Like the demon-possessed man, Jesus wants each of us to grow our faith, to deepen our relationship with him. The work is done within us so that we too can share the story of what God has done for us with the people who need to hear about God's love. By hearing our story, they learn of God's love. May we all share our stories often this week, sharing the love of Christ within. Let us pray...

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. Where has Jesus freed you recently, allowing you to grow deeper in your relationship with him?
- 2) Pray. Where do you need to still experience Jesus' freeing and redeeming power? Pray for strength and for the Spirit to lead and guide you.
- 3) Serve. Who do you know that needs to experience Jesus' love and restoration this week? How can you serve them by sharing your story?