

Unsettled by Grace

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Text: Luke 8:26-39

One of the things that I love about our worship—and I know others love it too—is the time of sharing joys and concerns. As a church we pray together. We pray for each other. We pray for people and situations across the world that weigh on our hearts. We draw close to God, knowing that God hears us when we pray. But in order to do this, we take time to hear one another. And that's why we send the microphone over to you when you've got something to share. I know some people think they can project loud enough. I used to be one of them myself. After all, we preachers didn't always have electronics to amplify our voices. So what preacher worth his salt can't raise his voice so as to be heard by the whole congregation, especially in a setting like this one, where it's only something like sixty feet from one end of the sanctuary to the other?

But now, of course, the congregation isn't just those of us sitting in this room, is it? We've got friends joining us online from across town, from across the county, from Florida... sometimes as far as Japan. And I don't care how much you project—your voice is not going to carry that far. We needed to use the microphones before—we *really* need them now!

But there's a theological reason, too, that goes beyond simply being practical. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that "faith comes from what is heard" (Romans 10:17). Faith comes from what is heard. That's why it's so important to have a sound system that makes our voices heard to one another. We encounter God not by looking deep within ourselves—if we listen to those cavernous depths, how can we distinguish God from the echo of our own desires and wishes? No, faith comes from what is heard, through a message that comes to us from outside of ourselves, a message that shakes us up and turns us upside down. Today I want to talk about our gospel story, and about the words that gave life back to someone who had no life to speak of, and about the way he turned and spoke what he heard to others.

There was a man, we're told, who lived among the tombs. His many demons used to seize him, and he frightened and threatened his neighbors so much that they tried tying him up, but he always broke free. The demons drove him away, into the wilds. And so he lost his friends. He lost his community. Isolated, naked, alone, among the dead he lived—if you could even call it living.

I want to lift up a word of admiration for this man. These are violent, destructive powers that take hold of him. Just look at what these demons do to an entire herd of pigs, driving them off a cliff and drowning them in the sea. What a burden to carry this violence within you! What an amazing thing it is for him to have borne this burden for so long, and yet still to be alive. When the destructiveness surges inside him, and he's no longer able to be restrained, he takes all this danger on himself, carrying this massive load of demons away into the wilderness. He removes the danger from his neighbors, though they don't credit him for it. Would it be too much to say that God was already at work in this man's life, keeping and preparing him for this encounter with Jesus?

And if that's so, then is there anyone so broken that God's grace is completely absent from them? In the people you most fear or resent, try to look for God's grace. And try to remember that so long as God is at work, the story isn't finished.

Now, Jesus was Jewish. In all likelihood, the man who met him was not. The fact that there were pigs kept as farm animals in this country should be a tip-off that Jesus and the disciples are outside of their comfort zone. The man greets Jesus as "Son of the Most High God" — only non-Jews used that name for God. Jesus could have written this guy off. He could have said, as he sometimes does elsewhere, that he came from God with a message for the Jewish people, and the Gentiles would have to wait their turn. But Jesus doesn't do that. Instead, he takes the message of the kingdom of God and liberation, new beginnings, a fresh start, and he makes that kingdom real for this suffering and isolated man. He tells the demons to leave the man. He allows them to take possession of a herd of pigs, which they promptly drown. (No one ever said demons were smart.) And the man is healed.

But the healing disturbs the community. The swineherds are upset that they've lost their animals (never mind that a human being has been given his life back). They run off to tell the townspeople what happened, and a crowd comes back to find Jesus and the man they knew as a possessed, tormented hermit sitting calmly at Jesus' feet, wearing clothes and in his right mind. You expect that the next sentence will read: "And they rejoiced." But instead it reads: "And they were afraid."

Why? Why do the Gerasenes respond to the healing of their neighbor with fear? Well, what do we do, in our own time, with people who are different in a way that feels threatening? We create separate spaces, where we don't have to see them or deal with them. We no longer warehouse people with psychiatric illnesses the way we did, say, fifty or sixty years in the past. But we have prisons and immigrant detention centers. And when the stories of indigenous or LGBTQ or enslaved people or their descendants start getting told, whether in our libraries or schools, there's a movement to shove these stories away, to bind them up so we don't have to hear them, to see them, and become uncomfortable.

What Jesus does in this story is to remove the brokenness, to restore health to this man, but in a way that imposes an economic cost, a sacrifice on the community, through the loss of their herd of pigs. The judgment on this community in this story is that they value the pigs more highly than their neighbor's life. A wild, disheveled man living among the tombs? Stuff happens — not an emergency. But a herd of pigs rushing down the cliff into the sea? Quick, send the herdsman into town to sound the alarm! These folks would rather keep their wealth and continue tying up this man, letting him live half-naked among the tombs. They're afraid of the power of the Kingdom of God that Jesus has brought among them, because who knows what it might do next?

Rather than stand in judgment of the Gerasenes, though, I'd rather have us look at ourselves. We learn to cope with brokenness, to the point that we come to accept and perpetuate things that are not healthy for us, for our neighbors, for our community, for creation. Where is God seeking to bring health and restoration today? Where is God seeking to bring in the people who live on the fringes? What's being asked of us — what do we need to set aside to lift the burdens others carry?

The man who was healed begs to come with Jesus. Wouldn't you? His neighbors still hadn't accepted him. The one person who had demonstrated compassion for him was leaving. But Jesus doesn't let him come along. Instead, he gives him a job: tell how much God has done for you. His job is to continue to disturb his neighbors with his presence, to be a walking "discrepant event," a human contradiction, a living refutation of the notion that nothing can ever change the daily brokenness we learn to

accommodate so well. You can see why he didn't want the job. It won't win him any friends. It probably doesn't pay very well either. But the man takes that job anyway, out of gratitude for what Jesus has done for him, and so the good news that Jesus came to spread has an advocate in the country of the Gerasenes.

Maybe you can identify with this man who felt so lonely and vulnerable for so long. Maybe you've had your own experience of feeling isolated and shut out. If so, I want to point out that this man came out to meet Jesus. He didn't know what to ask for. Actually, what he asked was for Jesus to leave him alone. But some little voice inside him cried out over the shouts of the other Legion voices, some little voice told him that he needed to hear a healing word that he couldn't offer himself. And it was Jesus' words that brought the unclean spirit out of the man. In our Hebrew scripture lesson, when the only words Elijah could find for himself were, "I'm all alone," it was the "sound of sheer silence," or as some translations read, "a still, small voice," that brought God's presence and peace to him.

When we're alone, isolated, anxious, we need a word that comes from beyond ourselves. Over the years I've spoken with some of you about your lives and where I thought God might be moving in them. The scriptures can be a powerful source of healing words, especially if you have a guide you trust. But I'm also grateful for the ministry of counselors, where I know some of you have found hope and healing. There are many places around us where, like the man from the gospel, we can meet Jesus, and hear the words we need to hear. If you're stuck or alone, don't pass up on the chance to hear them. We only have so many years on this earth. If there's even a chance that you don't have to be stuck where you are, why would you want to wait even another day? Come out, and meet Jesus.

But maybe for you those days are past. Maybe you have a memory of a disrupting word, a kindness that jolted you out of your funk, gave you hope, and put you on the way back to healing. Maybe you have a story, like this man's, about what Jesus has done for you. If so, then there's a reason you're here. Your job is to tell how much God has done for you, to be a witness to your neighbors that there is healing change with God, that we don't have to resign ourselves to endless wounding compromises with brokenness. Your job is to speak the healing words you've heard.

The theologian and teacher Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who returned from America to Nazi German to found an underground seminary for Christians to carry on the resistance to Hitler and his plans wrote a book about Christian community during that time. And here is what he says about why we need one another. The message of Jesus, Bonhoeffer says, brings us hope and a new beginning. "But God has put this Word," he writes, "into the mouth of [human beings] in order that it may be communicated to other [people]. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of [other believers], in the mouth of [another person]."¹ What Bonhoeffer is saying is that it's part of God's plan, it's how God intends for the good news of Jesus to spread, that we speak it to one another, that we hear it from one another.

We believe in a God who comes to meet us. Jesus crossed the sea, left his homeland, and landed in foreign territory, just to bring healing to one man. And in the same way, God meets us where we are... among the tombs, depressed, anxious, alone. Through Jesus, through our neighbor, God speaks to us a new word, a healing word we could never have pronounced to ourselves, and everything changes. So may your words, your actions, and your whole life express the grace you find, the healing you've experienced, the hope you hold in Jesus. Amen.

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1954. pp. 22-23.