

Recovering Our Minds

Seeking God's Wisdom in the Bible #5

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Sunday, July 12, 2020

Mark 5: 1-20

Introduction

I recently read an article (somewhere on the internet?) that over the past generation our bodies have gotten pretty healthy in comparison with previous generations, but our mental health – that's a completely different story. The truth is that our rates of anxiety and depression have increased significantly and many people are on medications for these conditions.

Of course, 2020 has been a year and a half already and we're only half-way through it. I could never have imagined that when we stopped face-to-face church in mid-March that we would still be so limited here in July as to what is safe to do as a community of faith. Mental health experts note that many of us in this time have fewer supports to keep us healthy – fewer exercise options, limited gatherings, isolation, just to name a few. The other day I asked a member how he is doing, and he responded, "ok." Ok is pretty good, under the circumstances!

So, as we come to this story, I am mindful that many of us are working to find the best ways to live, knowing that things will change week by week for the time being.

Entering the Story

Our story comes off Jesus pulling off his biggest, and splashiest, miracle – the stilling of the storm on the sea. To the astonishment of the disciples, he calmed the winds and the waves, considered at that time to be metaphorical cosmic elements of chaos. Their boat has crossed to "the other side," that is, the side where the gentiles, non-Jews, live.

Who is this man?

As they land, there is not a moment for them to catch their breath, as an outcast, a man described as possessed by an unclean spirit, greets them. He is described as one who howls at night, who breaks chains and is ungovernable approaches and hits himself with stones. One of our Bible study folks was reminded of people who cut themselves, and I was reminded of my mother's descriptions of her older sister when she exhibited symptoms of schizophrenia. This man lives among the dead, and in the times he lives in, might as well be dead. No support, and feared by others. It seems as though there is no hope for such a one as this.

Our Bible study group noted it is the voice of the unclean spirit and not the man possessed that responds to Jesus' command to come out. I find it interesting that like the devil that manipulates Jesus in the desert, the unclean spirit makes negotiations with Jesus – first a plea not to torment him, then an entreaty not to send him/them out of the area, and finally asking permission to enter the nearby swine in a field. Jesus' strength as the healer and savior becomes more apparent with each backtracking of the unclean spirit.

We learn along the way that the unclean spirit(s) name is Legion – a Roman name for a company of 6,000 soldiers. In other words, an overwhelming force, perhaps a chaos of its own.

As with confronting the winds and waves, Jesus steps into the situation and “gives permission” for the unclean spirits to enter the swine, who then rushed down a bank and drown in the sea.

Whose Swine?

Now, who eats swine in this time – not the Jews! And a herd of this size, in this gentile area, could well have been raised in order to feed the Roman soldiers who occupy Palestine at this time. The villagers would have seen this herd as their source of income and wealth – and its destruction would surely have been a source of comments and storytelling. The healing of the man was highly disruptive to their way of life depending on the Roman Empire for their sustenance.

The Bigger Picture

But there's another element at play here. The result of Jesus' encounter is that the man recovers himself – the villagers see the man now clothed and in his right mind – and they are afraid at this transformation. A healer in their midst? One who could bring someone back from living with the dead? What powers does this Jewish traveler have?

This man could not heal himself. This was not a case of someone being able to cure oneself through the power of positive thinking. It took God's gifted healer to help this man.

Now, I want to be clear on one thing. Modern psychiatry and psychology have given us great gifts in the treatment of mental health. We have tools and treatments today to give real relief to people who are anxious or depressed, or having more severe illness. In my own family, such treatments have been crucial for healthy living. Jesus would have loved to be able to refer people to mental health professionals!

On another level though, a faith level, this story reveals to us the essential character of Jesus – a sent-one of God who will not leave people as good as dead. This sent one has come to save even those who no longer can speak for oneself.

I'm reminded of a story that author Anne Lamott recounts in one of her books about an earlier point in her life, when she was in the grip of alcoholism that would take her life if she didn't change paths. She stops by a church, and was seeking to find God, and this priest makes time for her even though he doesn't know her and she is obviously hung over. She, who had had a grandfather who was a Christian missionary to China and a seminary professor on top of that, believed in God, but understood little more than that. So she asks him what it means to be saved?

Here's his reply:

"I guess it's like discovering you're on the shelf of a pawnshop, dusty and forgotten maybe not worth very much. But Jesus comes in and tells the pawnbroker, "I'll take her place on the shelf. Let her go outside again."

This encounter began a turn in Lamott's life, where she slowly began to make other choices because of Jesus. She began to make slightly better choices, and then even better ones, and in the middle of a crisis pregnancy she even started going to church (the one by the flea market) and initially would leave *before* the sermon. But that faith grew, and Anne's life became full again.

The man who had been possessed wants to join the Jesus band of followers, but Jesus is more interested in him developing his own testimony for others in his region. He tells him to go home (this is Gentile territory after all), and there he is commanded to give his testimony.

What of us?

When we say that Christ saves, we often will think of it strictly in terms of the hereafter – we're saving lives for then. But I really think Christ is asking more of us – to consider those who are feeling hopeless in this time of coronavirus and in need of connection and hope. We are being called to protect those who are at risk, but also to find ways that we can all still find meaning in our lives, day by day.

Let us remain connected to each other so that we can remain among the living, and share our hope with those who are downcast. Amen.