

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
Date: 23 June 2019
Lesson: Luke 8:26-39

It was the fall semester of my first year of seminary, and one day our class on the Gospels focused on this lesson we read today from Luke. There are so many fascinating parts to this story: a demon-possessed man, the swine herd, who the Gerasenes were, the response of the community to the man's healing, and Jesus' response to being asked to leave. The whole thing is ripe for discussion and analysis.

So the professor of this class fielded our questions and comments as we nit-picked the details of this story and what it means for us today. *"Is demon possession -- especially by so many -- even possible?"* someone asked. *"I think we should read this as mental illness,"* someone else said. *"Are there other accounts of Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee to perform healings in Gentile territory?"* asked one student. *"Since the man uses a Roman military term for his name, perhaps he is a veteran with PTSD,"* replied another. *"Did all the swine really need to drown?"* asked someone else. *"We treat mental illness today with medicine; what does this story have to say about healing with medicine?"* inquired another. There were a lot of ideas thrown out there, not necessarily flowing from the previous ones. In the midst of this, the hand of Bob went up. Bob was my dearest friend at that school, whom I had grown close to during our summer intensive Greek class. He is 30 years my senior, and he had a long career as a highly respected radio DJ in Chicago before heading off to seminary.

The professor called upon Bob, who then said in his rich baritone voice, "These are all excellent comments about this story, and in the academic pursuit of

knowledge they are all worthy of discussion. So this might not be worth much, because my thoughts on the story are not very academic. But here it goes. I am an alcoholic. I've been in recovery for nearly thirty years, but I am an alcoholic. I may not have been bound by literal chains like this man, but I know what it is like to be bound by the chains of alcohol. I may not have been forced to the outskirts of the community like this man, but my drinking absolutely destroyed my relationships. And I may not have been living in the tombs, but I've lived in a place of deep despair. In the end, what I believe I truly share with this man is that Jesus did not hesitate to draw near to us when we were at our worst. Because of that, Jesus has become a stronger force in my life than the alcohol that still binds me. And even when I have those days that Jesus doesn't seem to be the stronger force between the two, I know that Jesus is still my help, my comfort, and my healing.”

I don't recall the others in the class having much to say after that. There is a place and a need for the Church to think and debate on a higher level, but that shouldn't get in the way of the experience of Jesus working in our lives.

Whenever Jesus confronts demons in the gospels, there are three common traits to those stories:

- 1) The demons cause self-destructive behavior in the victim.
- 2) This victim feels ensnared by the condition.
- 3) The demon separates the victim from normal living within their social circle.

That doesn't sound too unfamiliar to me. We can all be captured by this. We might not be captured by mental illness or even Alcohol Use Disorder, but there are other diagnosable ailments and there are even just plain destructive habits that can capture us and prevent us from becoming all that God desires our lives to be. Some

people might label such things as demonic, and others wouldn't. We aren't going to figure that one out, so I don't think we need to worry about determining whether or not supernatural evil is involved in such things. The reason is because in our baptismal liturgy we renounce "the devil and all the forces that defy God." So whether they are supernatural evil or not, we renounce them either way as things that defy God's intention for our lives.

What God intends for our lives are namely that our lives are rooted in God, that our lives bear the fruit of God's goodness, and that all of this is done in human community. That is exactly the healing that Jesus brought to the man in our story, it is the healing that Jesus brings to my friend Bob, and the healing that Jesus brings to us.

So I find it a little odd when we read that the townspeople saw what took place, and the first thing they did was ask Jesus to leave. You'd think that upon seeing a healing the townspeople would want to keep the healer around. But I guess that's not the case if you happen to know the one who was healed... you know, that strange, maniacal man who lives on the outskirts of town. To paraphrase author Rachel Held Evans, "What makes the Gospel offensive... isn't who it keeps out... but who it lets in."

So Jesus heeded the request of the townspeople and he prepared to head back across the sea to Galilee. But before he could depart, the healed man asked to come along, to be a disciple. Jesus said to him, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." Which is what the man does.

We don't give this brief exchange too much thought, but we should realize that was a bold commission that Jesus gave this man. This is the first time that Jesus sends

someone out into Gentile territory to share the Gospel to the people there. Not even the twelve disciples have been sent yet. So off this man went. The man had not received any formal training. The man had not spent years as a disciple learning at the feet of his master. This man didn't even have a strong reputation in his own community that could be called upon to back him up.

The only thing that this man had was a story of Jesus. It was a story that went like this: when this man was at his worst, that didn't stop Jesus from drawing close to him. And it didn't stop Jesus from trusting this man with sharing that good news.

That is the good news for us all; that Jesus still loves us enough to encounter us even when we are at our worst, and that is the good news we are sent to share.

Thanks be to God. Amen.