



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7
St. Mark's on the Campus
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Most of us have heard that saying, "it's all in the details." I don't know if it's *ALL* in the details, but certainly there's a lot in the details of our gospel story this morning that transforms it from a simple healing story – if there is such a thing! -- into far more. I want to spend the next several minutes exploring some of those details that Luke deliberately puts into this story to enrich and expand its meaning.

This passage begins as Jesus steps out of a boat onto the land of the Garasenes. It's not completely clear the location Luke has in mind; it could be a couple of different places. What is clear is that this land is Gentile territory, land of those who stand outside the Hebraic covenant with God. That's probably a significant point considering that in Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, he describes how, in Jesus, the covenant is broken open and the Gentiles are brought into the community of faith in Yahweh, the God of Jesus Christ. *Communities* play a critical role in this healing story.

We're told that the man who meets Jesus as he climbs out of the boat has many demons. Because of his condition, the man lives *outside* the town; he lives naked among the tombs. He's not living as part of the *human* community. His nakedness represents a distance from civilization, including its protections. Metaphorically this man is already dead, living among those who are literally dead. This man no longer has any real community, aside from the demons that separate him from a community of care and love.

After Jesus drives the demons out of the man – after he heals him – the Greek actually says “saves” him, which you might remember means that Jesus makes him *whole* – afterwards, we find the man sitting at the Lord’s feet, “*clothed* and in his right mind.” He’s *back* among the human community; with wholeness comes a reconnection with the community from which he is removed in his brokenness; part of what Jesus does is to bring this man back into communion with the world around him – and back into communion with God.

This man’s need to be reunited with the community from which he has been living in seclusion is underscored. When the man tells Jesus that he wants to go with Jesus, Jesus says no, that he must return home and tell others all about what God has done for him. Part of this man’s wholeness, part of the salvation of *all* of us who have been touched by the presence of God, is to give witness to that presence, to show by the way we live within our various communities how much more whole we are because of the ways God makes it possible for us to be more whole.

Jesus instructs this man to go out and share that good news with his community; and Jesus instructs all of us who follow him to do so in our communities. Just as he gives witness to the power of God within the covenant community to which *he* belongs, and just as this man, freed from the many demons that overpower him, is called to give witness to God within the community to which *he* is restored, so we are called within the various communities into which *we* are called to give witness to the power of God changing *our* lives.

Following Jesus sometimes means not going where he goes but going where *we* are called to go -- with the same Spirit and the same faith in the power of God to transform lives, beginning with our own, whatever demons threaten to overpower us.

A bit later in this morning’s Eucharist, Carol and I are renewing our wedding vows. It might be strange to some of you to see this in the context of a Sunday Eucharist; others will have experienced not only the renewal of vows but weddings themselves on Sunday morning.

It's really quite wonderful when that happens; it's a sign of how much the couple is a part of the faith community and it's really quite appropriate. So who knows, maybe this isn't the last time you'll see a renewal of wedding vows or even a wedding on Sunday morning! In the traditional understanding of marriage, God forms a new community of the couple, a community that – by God's grace -- itself bears witness to the love between Christ and the church: the love Christ has for the church, and the love that we, the church, have for Christ.

When you think about it, that's a remarkable theology, that in the very nature of humans coming together, God makes it possible that we reveal God's love to each other, a reality that is only known when we participate in it. And I can certainly attest that the theology is true, as many of you can as well. There have been outstanding moments in my marriage in which it has been nothing less than a revelation of the amazing love of God in which we participate.

The great news of God in Jesus is that such revelation occurs in all kinds of relationships. Whenever we are living into God's grace, the love of God's Holy Spirit breaks out; the Holy Spirit isn't confined to either traditional or non-traditional expressions; the love of God is not limited by *our* limitations. But our limitations do, of course, *affect* God's love. If I'm honest, I've seen that truth in our marriage as well, when either Carol or I have been more interested in something other than the love that reveals God to us and to the world around us, that love, as St. Paul writes, without which we are nothing.

We see how human limitations affect the love of God being played out in our gospel reading, too. People come out from the town, out from the human community, to see what has happened to this man filled with demons. What they witness is a person who has been made whole by the power of God. And they're afraid. So they ask Jesus to leave them. We're not quite sure what they're afraid of. Maybe they're upset that the swineherds have lost all those pigs, and therefore they've taken an economic loss. That would certainly be understandable, and it wouldn't be the first time in human history that economics rather than the transforming power of God has been the determining factor about how welcome the presence of God is in a community.

It's also possible that their fear arises out of their inability to control things. They think they have this problem with this man with the demons solved. Then Jesus comes along and creates a whole new situation to deal with. Maybe they would have been just as happy if the man HAD gone away with Jesus. Who knows what kind of havoc the guy is going to cause now with this witness to the power of God which remains completely outside *anyone's* control? Who knows what GOD might bring about next?

So they drive Jesus away; they ask the one who manifests God's presence and power to move along. Just as we all do sometimes in the many communities in which we live. One of the major heresies of our time is that salvation is individual; that it's all about me and Jesus. That's not a Christian perspective. Sure, there's an element of truth in it as there is in all heresy. But Christian salvation, Christian wholeness, takes place *within* community, whether it be the covenant community or the marital community or any of the myriad other communities with which God graces our lives, calling us to make them ever more holy and therefore a reflection of the Trinity itself.

We don't have control over those communities any more than we have control over the power of God, any more than the Garasenes had control over the power of God working in the life of that man possessed by many demons. In fact, we often find salvation – wholeness – breaking out precisely where we have the *least* control, or where we have attempted to shackle the world with the illusion of control; in both cases, it seems that God is able to act most freely: in those areas where we have least control because our actions are no longer frustrating the desires of God; and in those areas where our human oppression gives illusion of control because people living within that kind of bondage, within that kind of slavery, are so longing for God's grace – they need and want miracles to occur in their lives and within their communities.

May God grant all the worlds' people whole lives, and holy communities within which to lead those lives, to God's great glory. Amen.