

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Mark 5:1-20

Rev. Tyler Amundson

July 12, 2020

The Unraveling of the Mind

Mark 5:1-20 Common English Bible (CEB)

Jesus frees a demon-possessed man

5 Jesus and his disciples came to the other side of the lake, to the region of the Gerasenes.² As soon as Jesus got out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out of the tombs.³ This man lived among the tombs, and no one was ever strong enough to restrain him, even with a chain.⁴ He had been secured many times with leg irons and chains, but he broke the chains and smashed the leg irons. No one was tough enough to control him.⁵ Night and day in the tombs and the hills, he would howl and cut himself with stones.⁶ When he saw Jesus from far away, he ran and knelt before him,⁷ shouting, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won’t torture me!”

⁸ He said this because Jesus had already commanded him, “Unclean spirit, come out of the man!”

⁹ Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

He responded, “Legion is my name, because we are many.”¹⁰ They pleaded with Jesus not to send them out of that region.

¹¹ A large herd of pigs was feeding on the hillside.¹² “Send us into the pigs!” they begged. “Let us go into the pigs!”¹³ Jesus gave them permission, so the unclean spirits left the man and went into the pigs. Then the herd of about two thousand pigs rushed down the cliff into the lake and drowned.

¹⁴ Those who tended the pigs ran away and told the story in the city and in the countryside. People came to see what had happened.¹⁵ They came

to Jesus and saw the man who used to be demon-possessed. They saw the very man who had been filled with many demons sitting there fully dressed and completely sane, and they were filled with awe. ¹⁶ Those who had actually seen what had happened to the demon-possessed man told the others about the pigs. ¹⁷ Then they pleaded with Jesus to leave their region.

¹⁸ While he was climbing into the boat, the one who had been demon-possessed pleaded with Jesus to let him come along as one of his disciples. ¹⁹ But Jesus wouldn't allow it. "Go home to your own people," Jesus said, "and tell them what the Lord has done for you and how he has shown you mercy." ²⁰ The man went away and began to proclaim in the Ten Cities all that Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed.

Intro for series:

The next several weeks we will be exploring scriptures that seem to unravel us, the characters and the understanding that God always works in the clean places. The hope of this series of messages is that we take seriously how God unravels us, our tidy expectations of life, and instead invites us to be spun into something unique that God has for our lives. This unraveling series will be full of connotations and metaphors drawn from our scriptures to help us grasp with our senses what God is saying to us, what the great weaver, spinner, and artist wants us to know about where we are being sewn into God's tapestry and story.

Sermon:

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

God of unending surprises,
This life is a tapestry of moments woven together, and we long to be weavers of love. Today we gather and pray that you would unravel our bias.

Unravel our assumptions.
Unravel whatever it is that keeps us from you.
And as you do, clear space in our hearts for your Word.
We are listening. We are praying.
Amen.

Alright, so unabashedly let me say a few things about our scripture for today, right from the start.

1. Oh the number of preachers that avoid this sermon abounds. In fact this scripture isn't found very readily in what preachers use to get through the whole Bible, a ordering we call the lectionary. This story is buried deep within.
2. Evangelical Christians tend to focus this scripture more on evil and the drawing out of evil in spiritual warfare, demons and all.
3. I unabashedly quickly focus this scripture into understanding real world challenges that face people I meet every day, scientifically based understandings mind you. In which I quickly assign the demons in this story with mental illness, dementia, addiction, cognitive disease or some other scientific explanation for irrational behavior.

But I could be wrong to do that.

And I do think spiritual warfare gurus miss the mark too.

And avoiding a scripture passage because it makes me feel uncomfortable...is by the definition of following Jesus, not an option to me.

Jesus invites us into the hard, unraveling stories of scripture. Because well...we need it.

And our human understandings will fall short of really grasping the depth of these stories, because we will always focus on the symbols that make sense to us at the time we are reading the scripture.

So before I go writing off evil in this story...let me pause for a minute.

Alexander Schmemmann puts it says, “Evil is not just an absence of good, but the presence of a dark irrational power.”

Have you experienced someone in your life with a mental illness that caused them to do things that no one could process? How about people with cognitive illnesses like dementia and Alzheimer’s disease whose very actions related to what seemed like a dark irrational power they could not contain? Have you seen a child who has been traumatized act in a way that is so dark that they convulse from the hormones and emotions coursing through their body?

Here is the thing, our scripture today creates a lot of problems if we truly sit down and grapple with reading it. A human so possessed by a legion of demons that he lives among the graveyard, the dead. A community so at a loss for how to help a man, that when he is helped to be free of this affliction, they drive away the one who met him where he was at and made him one who could offer life, instead of take it. And the fear this scripture raises for the townspeople, the demon, and for us as we try to understand what to do with the pig part.

If we really look at this part we might start to imagine this in the context of spiritual warfare combined with scientific understanding, and if we mix in some Holy Spirit we might start to imagine that this story is about a man afflicted by a dark and irrational power. And if we dare to be pushed toward the scientific or the spiritual warfare side, whichever is more uncomfortable for us, we might start to take notice as author Rachael Held Evans puts it, that:

“Indeed, our sins—hate, fear, greed, jealousy, lust, materialism, pride—can at times take such distinct forms in our lives that we recognize them in the faces of the gargoyles and grotesques that guard our cathedral doors. And these sins join in a chorus—you might even say a legion—of voices locked in an ongoing battle with God to lay claim over our

identity, to convince us we belong to them, that they have the right to name us. Where God calls the baptized beloved, demons call her addict, slut, sinner, failure, fat, worthless, faker, screwup. Where God calls her child, the demons beckon with rich, powerful, pretty, important, religious, esteemed, accomplished, right. It is no coincidence that when Satan tempted Jesus after his baptism, he began his entreaties with, “If you are the Son of God . . .” We all long for someone to tell us who we are. The great struggle of the Christian life is to take God’s name for us, to believe we are beloved and to believe that is enough.¹”

The very first act we take as Christians, in our baptism, the questions is do renounce the evil things of the world. For Orthodox Christians some are asked to even spit in the face of evil. Then we state in no certain terms that “we are a child of God and we renounce anything that says otherwise.” We write off anything that would stand in the way of us recognizing that for ourselves, then Jesus through his life shows us we have to learn to throw off anything that would stand in the way of us recognizing that for others, and then we even have to do it for our enemies or those afflicted by demons, if we want to really follow Jesus.

In our scripture today if we follow Jesus he meets someone, whose mind is unraveling, in what counselors term as term “here he was at.” In other words the first rule we must learn from Jesus about overcoming our fear, about facing what seems evil, irrational force beyond our control is we have to face it. Sometimes, we have to face it in ways that seem irrational to the rest of the world.

Take this story from a friend of mine for example:

¹ Evans, Rachel Held. Searching for Sunday (p. 19). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

“Nearly 25 years ago she was working as a residential care provider on an inpatient unit for young people with emotional difficulties. My friend and other staff were trained to de-escalate volatile situations using specific treatment techniques. One evening, a teenage client became extremely upset, tossing furniture in the common area while screaming and threatening other clients and staff. She then darted into her room and slammed the door. My friend was the first to reach her and when she entered the room was surprised to find the young woman sitting on top of a large wooden wardrobe. The unit had strict rules about acceptable behavior, and sitting atop a 6-foot structure was not allowed. Other staff members entered the room and began demanding she get down, threatening time in lock-up if she didn’t comply. My friend went to the other side of the room and began dragging the desk close to the wardrobe, and then asked the staff to leave them alone with the young woman for a while. They glared, then gave in. My friend proceeded to climb on the desk and then onto the wardrobe with the young girl. Both sat in silence for quite some time, then talked and eventually crawled down together. Neither of them were off the hook for our behavior that day...both faced consequences for failing to comply, but they weren’t severe, and the young woman and my friend connected in a way that obviously had a lasting effect on my friend. I hope the same can be said for the young woman. Their time together was about so much more than talking through difficult issues, it was also about connecting in a way that felt safe for her, and about honoring her unique and individual needs. Each had a purpose on that day... in that encounter they were both children of God.”²

The afflictions and evils of our modern world vary. To understand the evils they cause is important, and to understand that the people

² From my dear friend, Theologian of Art, Sue McNicol

possessed by them is equally important. The two primary areas I have encountered this work is mental illness and dementia. Things I think we would call unraveling of the mind. Though, as we all know the mind can fail just like many other parts of the body, perhaps the one thing that can help us overcome the fear generated by this reality is the understanding that come from baptism. We are all children of God, called by God, and that when God enters our world...or even when we as individuals can represent God to someone in their injured world. The demons start to speak to God...in our story today they speak to Jesus and then he casts them into pigs. I think a convenient unclean scapegoat, for the gospel writer.

Then something happens. 1. The fear of Jesus bringing this man back causes the people to drive Jesus away. 2. Jesus doesn't resist instead he offers the man back to them as the disciple he begs to be with Jesus, perhaps one of the first to share the good news of Christ is one who has faced mental illness or some other cognitive challenge. This imperfect human is who Jesus entrust with the Gospel in this story.

I have talked about dementia alongside mental illness in this sermon because I have seen how dementia can feel evil in families too. A loved one loses their past, at times becomes aggressive. I have seen faith communities lose the ability to include people in their rituals, and worship because they can't name the demons and talk with them. For me all the unraveling of the mind situations in life are becoming more and more similar.

As a pastor I am growing impatient that our communities of faith, in their rush to be this perfect place of worship, and fit the cookie cutter church model have rushed passed the ministry opportunity that could transform us.

Churches could focus on unraveling of the mind as their only ministry focus and people would come running for healing.

A church that loves traumatized children, being trauma informed would bring in families left and right.

A church that loves people with dementia, being dementia friendly would bring in families left and right.

A church that loves people with mental illness, being open to grappling with the uncertainties, would bring in people and families left and right.

Where do we fall short, where do we sin. We fail to follow the pattern of this scripture.

As I have studied these three areas some similar patterns emerge that I think this story best describes:³

One family had a mother living with them with early stages of a form of dementia. At times she would become confused. One day she mistook her granddaughter for her daughter. She even got belligerent in a verbal confrontation trying to prove she was right, not recognizing her own daughter. The family, even in the early stages of the disease, was losing hope.

Then one of the family members, the son-in-law, tried something. He started to heed the advice of experts around dementia and leaned into his mother-in-law's reality. Meeting her where she was at, and not trying to convince her of differences in reality at first. Then he started treating it like an improv, sketch comedy routine.

Each scenario was about meeting his mother-in-law, their mother and grandmother where she was at. Sure her granddaughter might be her daughter for a moment, but what was wrong with that. As long as the

³ <https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/health/info-2018/humor-alzheimers-dementia-caregiving.html>

relationship supported grandma in the moment, then the mom could be a kindly stranger helping them out. Or if they were having fun, mom could be the neighbor who told a good joke.

For this family meeting their loved one, in her reality opened more joy and laughter in their lives.

If churches were to listen to Jesus in this passage we would follow these steps and not only that our whole church would pick populations of people with various afflictions and apply these steps to how we did our ministry. These are steps for dementia, but spend ten minutes and you can find similar steps for children with trauma or people living with mental illness or another affliction God has placed in your journey for you to work with Christ to bring healing.

Enter their world. The person with dementia makes sense to herself. Don't argue with or correct Mom if she's confused or delusional. Go along with it. If Mom says, "I'm waiting for Dad to pick me up" (and Dad is deceased), say, "Tell me again how you and Dad first met."

Validate their feelings. Reassure your family member that he is loved. People with dementia may get frustrated and lash out at the ones they're closest to. If Dad fights you when you're helping him get dressed, stay calm. Say, "I can see you're uncomfortable in that sweater. Let me get you a different one."

Redirect their focus. Shift your loved one's attention away from something stressful and toward something pleasant. When Mom gets anxious, for example, encourage her to cuddle the family pet, or show her a funny YouTube video or photographs of the grandkids.

Apologize and take the blame. Even when you're not at fault, an apology defuses a tense situation. Keep it simple: "I'm sorry I misunderstood."

Change the environment. People with dementia can become agitated by or fixated on something in their surroundings. They might get upset by newspapers on the kitchen counter or want to use power tools they

see in the garage. Move disturbing or potentially dangerous items out of the way. Create a calm, well-ordered place for your loved one to go to, such as a porch swing by the flowers she planted.

Give simple choices. Your family member may feel as if he no longer has any say over his life. Letting him make small decisions helps him feel in control. Ask “Would you like eggs or cereal for breakfast?” instead of setting down a bowl of corn flakes.

Involve them in meaningful activities. Research shows that participating in physical, mental and social activities reduces stress and anxiety for people with dementia. Try art or music or going for a walk. If a group outing is too much, invite a good friend over for lunch.⁴

If we are to take this story seriously we have to consider evil as being that which tries to name us. We have to take seriously that God renames us all beloved. And we have to work to live into the moment, like Christ does. If we do, then we will be part of calling a new generation of disciples just like this man from Gerasene whom people thought would never be free of his demons.

-Invitation to Dementia Friendly work and Mental Health Friends Network

Would you join me in affirming the faith found in the Good News we just heard in scripture and word?

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

⁴ <https://www.guideposts.org/caregiving/alzheimers-and-dementia/everyday-coping-for-caregivers/7-keys-to-caring-for-a-loved-one-with-dementia>

I believe in God, the Great Sewer—
Who weaves us together in community,
Collecting our loose ends and turning them into belonging.

I believe in the Holy Spirit—
Who hems us in before and behind,
Catching us when we fall and writing us into God's holy narrative.

And I believe in Jesus Christ—
Who loved and claimed the people society had thrown out, refusing to
disregard

anyone as scrap.

I believe God has woven part of God's self into the fiber of our being,
Making us inherently worthy of love and belonging.

I believe the fabric of my life is weak,
That I am prone to error and need God's handiwork to remind me of
love.

I believe in the Church, and that like a quilt of different fabrics, She is
designed to be as diverse and beautiful as God's creation.

And I believe that when life unravels,
God is there to stitch my wounds together,
To hold me in the palm of God's hand, to tell me of love, And to invite
me into a new journey.

Amen.

10 Minute – Mini-Sermon: Bernice Story

- Imagine this story through the lens of fear. How does fear impact each of these characters?

- The disciples
 - Legion
 - The townspeople
- Who do you identify with the most in this story and why?
- Rewrite the end of the story. How could the townspeople respond to Legion's healing instead of with fear and by forcing Jesus away? How might we attempt to live into this better vision? as individuals? as a church? as a community?