

“IN RESPONSE TO GOD”

Mark 5:1-20; Ephesians 2:1-10

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There are a number of odd things about this story from Mark, but the thing that sticks out for me is Jesus' willingness to negotiate with demons. This man, possessed by demons, is creating all manner of chaos in the countryside for the community that lives there. The demons recognize Jesus and know that it means their influence will be coming to an end. And so they plead with Jesus to be allowed to enter the herd of swine. We aren't told why they want this or why Jesus grants their request. The result is twofold: the demons are returned to the sea, a common image for the forces of chaos, the earth before creation; and an economic loss for the owner of the herd. Even if the swineherds were able to recover the pigs, no one will want to purchase the meat once the story gets out. The one thing that doesn't surprise us is that the villagers want Jesus to leave.

I'll come back to this part of the story, but now I want to focus on the response of the once-possessed man. He is utterly transformed, "clothed and in his right mind," we are told. As Jesus leaves, the man begs to be allowed to go with him. Instead of granting his request, as he did for the demons, Jesus refuses, and instructs him to go home to his friends, tell them what God has done for him, and the mercy that he had received.

I imagine that it would have been easier, following his transformation, to start over in a new place with new friends. Following successful drug or alcohol treatment, we worry about relapse as people return home. After release from prison, we worry about their return to their old setting with the same friends and connections. A changed life is difficult to live in the old setting.

Maybe we are surprised that this man had a home and friends to go back to. But he listens to Jesus. The change sticks. His witness is effective. People are amazed.

An unusual story... and yet so similar to what Paul describes in Ephesians: "dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else."

The demoniac disrupted the peace of the community. In a similar way, Paul understood the previous life of those near Ephesus as a disruption to God's desire for them and the world. This disturbance was carried out under the influence of "the ruler of the power of the air," and Paul names this condition and behavior as "sin." Their behavior may have lacked the violence of the demoniac, but its effect undermined the desires of God for the world.

Similarly, what seems innocent in our world, may also have far-reaching negative consequences, clouding our vision of the sacred character of life. Carter Heyward wrote in her recent book, “you might think of sin as a formidable psychosocial impediment to our shaping a justice-loving world – a boulder we encounter along the way that blocks our passage and turns us back or causes us to crash. Or you might think of sin as a wrecking ball used by prevailing institutions and powerful people to smash apart possibilities for our collective healing and liberation as a society” (p. 46).

I don’t know what the solution is for Palestine-Israel, but I do know that the utter disregard for human life and human rights will never bring healing. I do know that taking ten Palestinian lives for every Israeli life will not bring security to Israel, that desperate acts of violence will not rally the world to the Palestinian cause. We need to stop seeing “demons” and start seeing people, people loved by God.

We need to stop listening to demons and start listening for the desires of God. The politics of hate is a wrecking ball crushing the poor and the vulnerable. It’s turning our schools into a breeding ground for bigotry. It’s destroying an already broken healthcare system. It’s compromising the health of the planet. The demons must go.

This is a pretty polarized way of seeing the world and I have to admit that I’m not comfortable with that, but this is how the reformers saw things 500 years ago. Martin Luther drafted 95 theses in which he detailed the abuses and corruption of the Catholic Church. He didn’t hesitate to link the Pope with Satan. *A Mighty Fortress*, which we sang today, depicts the struggle for truth as a battle with the devil. And the same was true in the Church’s regard for Luther. When asked by the Church to recant his views, the story goes, Luther insisted that unless the learned could show him his error from Scripture and reason, his conscience bound him. “Here I stand,” he said. Though he claims that his conversion came from a passage in Romans, this passage in Ephesians, states quite well the truth he had discovered. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works....”

“Tell your friends what God has done for you, what mercy God has shown you.” This is the response Jesus asks of the former demoniac. This is what the Reformers insisted on before the Church: the life of faith begins with mercy and grace. The whole life which we at Westminster try to live can only be lived “in response to God.”

In listening to scripture, Luther believed he was listening to God. As a monk he’d seen ample evidence of the corruption of the church, its priests, and the pope. Over the centuries, the church had distorted the voice of God. “Sola Scriptura” was the cry of the reformers. Not tradition, not the Pope; scripture was the standard by which the church set its theology and practice.

One has to wonder whether the church continues to distort God’s voice today. “The Bible says...” begins the sentence that ends in judgment of homosexuals, that justifies slavery, patriarchy, and white supremacy. “Sola scriptura,” the cry that ended the tyranny of papal declarations, that emphasized grace over works, that reclaimed the priesthood of all

believers, is now being used to narrow the definition of the faithful and to exclude people from the circle of God's concern.

As Presbyterians, we belong to the Reformed Tradition. We take pride in claiming that we are "always reformed," but honesty calls us to confess that we act more reformed than "reforming." If we are paying attention to the most recent calls for reform, we are less focused on "right belief" and more focused on faithful living.

Brian McLaren suggests that we begin with the heart, the seat of desire. He lists three desires in this order. "A more mature community," he says, "will desire the good of the planet.... A more mature humanity will *desire the good of all people*.... nested within our desire for a healthy planet and a just society, we will *desire our personal or individual well-being*" (p.171). When we emphasize the good of people over the good of the planet, we get a fractured planet. When we raise the good of self over the good of others, we get polarized communities. It's important that we nest the more specific love under the broader. For people of faith, "Divine love is the nest in which the other desires are nurtured, and it is inherent in all other loves" (p.172).

We always get in trouble when we restrict the grace and mercy of God. "This transcendent love," writes McLaren, "is the one desire that enlivens the striving world, the desire for mutual well-being, for conviviality in Harmony and Solidarity. When this love flows on a planetary (and cosmic) level, on a social (or communal) level, and on a personal (or individual) level, we see it as the one love that animates all other loves. It is the *life* of the web of life... of which we're a part. When we cut ourselves off from it, we're like a branch that amputates itself from a vine or tree" (pp. 172-3).

The reformers rediscovered the grace of God. But when they and we began to restrict that grace to the elect, to those with correct beliefs, we forgot that grace flows from the expansive and inclusive love of God. But many people, not just Christians are returning to this more expansive understanding of grace, a grace that recognizes the beloved human being hidden by the demonic, a grace willing to negotiate with demons to free the loved individual beneath.

McLaren writes, "I imagine a new kind of Christianity – and a new kind of humanity – that instills and strengthens this nested integration of holy, transcendent desires for the beloved world and all it contains" (p. 175). Our story may not be as dramatic as the Gerasene demoniac, but we do have a story nested in the inclusive love of God. May our words and actions, our very being reflect the grace, mercy, and love of God. May we be vessels of love and not impediments to justice. May we be pathways to peace and not boulders in the way, conduits of healing and liberation and not wrecking balls smashing possibility. May we rest in God's love and embody it in our lives. Amen.

Heyward, Carter. *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action*. Rowan and Littlefield: Lanham MD. 2022.

McLaren, Brian. *Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned*. St. Martin's: New York NY. 2022.