

Great Mercy

Purpose

To learn to listen to Jesus' words of grace and hope in our dying

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Mark 5:1-20 (NIV)

11 They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.

2 When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him.

3 This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain.

4 For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him.

5 Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him.

7 He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!"

8 For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!"

9 Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many."

10 And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

11 A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside.

12 The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them."

13 He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

14 Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened.

15 When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.

16 Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well.

17 Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.

19 Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."

20 So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Mark 5:1-20 (KJV)

1 And they came over unto the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gadarenes.

2 And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit,

3 Who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains:

4 Because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him.

5 And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting

himself with stones.

6 But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him,

7 And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not.

8 For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.

9 And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many.

10 And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country.

11 Now there was there nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding.

12 And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them.

13 And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thou-

sand;) and were choked in the sea.

14 And they that fed the swine fled, and told it in the city, and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that was done.

15 And they come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid.

16 And they that saw it told them how it befell to him that was possessed with the devil, and also concerning the swine.

17 And they began to pray him to depart out of their coasts.

18 And when he was come into the ship, he that had been possessed with the devil prayed him that he might be with him.

19 Howbeit Jesus suffered him not, but saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee.

20 And he departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him: and all men did marvel.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

August 24 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

August 25 Isaiah 65:1-5

August 26 Zechariah 9:9-12

August 27 Luke 10:17-24

August 28 Mark 1:21-28

August 29 Mark 5:1-13

August 30 Mark 5:14-20

Seeing the Need

Webster's Dictionary gives us an extensive list of definitions for the word "broken": fractured, shattered, splintered, crushed, not complete or full. The idea of brokenness is based on the understanding of what wholeness might look like. Broken things are usually thrown away or rejected. Obviously, wholeness refers to something that is complete and entire in its makeup.

We often hear people talk about broken institutions and organizations. Our educational system is broken because in many cases, in areas of funding, adequate equipment and resources, graduation rates, and overall quality, we still have much work to do. Health care systems are broken in light of the overall

need and services provided to people, especially the marginalized. Most important for me is to consider the brokenness in the lives of people. As I am writing this lesson during the Christmas season, I am reminded that for many, this is one of the saddest and most depressing times of the year. Suicide watch is heightened during this season. Crime rates are subject to increase. How ironic in a season of good will and peace on earth.

Jesus confronted brokenness on every level. In this lesson we read about a broken man who met Jesus at his lowest moment. Jesus' redemptive love brought spiritual and physical wholeness to him. His restoration story became the means by which others in his community also found healing and wholeness.

A Demon-possessed Man

Jesus and the disciples seem to have been always on the move. In Mark 5, we read about them in a boat going across the Sea of Galilee on their way to the city of Gadara. Mark's Gospel refers to this location as "the region of the Gerasenes" (Mark 5:1). A map of this terrain shows that this was a mountainous area with many caves, which were often used as places for burial as well as living quarters for local residents. It was in this rugged Gentile region located about 35 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee that Mark's account of a broken man begins. We don't know why Jesus and the disciples were visiting this area, but as a result of this visit, Jesus made an unforgettable impact on an individual and an entire community.

Mark says that no sooner than Jesus

had arrived on shore, "a man possessed by an evil spirit came out of the tombs" (verse 2). The Message Bible refers to him as a "madman." We do not know whether this possessed man was watching Jesus from a distance or whether curiosity just got the best of him. In any case, he had no problem making himself known to Jesus and the disciples. Who was this man? Mark gives us a vivid and somewhat depressing account of his identity. First, he lived among the tombs. The assumption is that he was perhaps a local person who may have been homeless or destitute in some way. Mark says that he howled day and night, and apparently he had either cut himself on rocks in a cave or had self-inflicted cuts from rocks. The fact that he had at one point been chained suggests a possible mental condition that made him a threat to himself and others. It seems that the larger community had at some point tried to help him, but in the final analysis, "No one was tough enough to control him" (verse 4). His plight is sad, as he was apparently a "throw-away," left to fend for himself.

It is so easy to discard persons who are not like us or who may have limiting conditions. Unfortunately, I saw this attitude to some degree when I worked years ago in a special needs classroom at a public school. My impression was that some people tend to overlook the disabilities of others and offer them at best a condescending and uneasy politeness. They seem to label these individuals as persons with a preset destiny of doom and failure. Yet God's mercy and abundant love greets and makes a place for every-

one as persons of sacred worth.

When the possessed man met Jesus, something unusual happened. We do not know exactly what he was thinking, but his actions show that the presence of Jesus had commanded his attention and that of the evil spirit within him. He ran to Jesus and knelt before him. This does not seem to have been a worshipful act on his part, but an expression of humble submission from the demon or evil spirit within him. The part of this individual that controlled his behavior was reacting to the power of the living Christ standing before him. This evil spirit therefore candidly spoke, saying, “Swear to God that you won’t torture me!” (verse 7). While this story might be a little eerie and baffling to the modern mind, the message is clear. Jesus commands and overpowers the forces of evil meant to do us harm.

What concerns you most about the needs of the poor and marginalized in society?

The Demons Expelled

The sports announcer at my hometown football game often described a winning play by saying that the player on our team introduced himself “up close and personal” to his opponent. Likewise, Jesus got right into the space of this possessed man and spoke to his issue. “Unclean spirit, come out of the man!” (verse 8) Jesus’ spiritual diagnosis was spot on. This man was spiritually and physically controlled by a power greater than himself. He needed deliverance. The Lord’s direct question was, “What is your name?” (verse 9). “Legion” (signifying a large number) gave Jesus and the disci-

ples a pinpoint description of the sickness and strength of the malignancy in this man.

How are we to understand “Send us into the pigs!” (verse 12)? Scholars across the centuries have debated the “pig” theology of this passage. Mark and other Gospel writers give no real spiritual meaning and significance of this act. It was apparently just the request of these demons or evil spirits. They knew that they could no longer abide in this tortured man. Luke does report, however, that these spirits did not want to go into the abyss, the abode of demons or of the dead (Luke 8:31; see also Revelation 9:11). In his mercy, Jesus gave the demons permission to enter into the herd of pigs. The reaction of the pigs gave proof that the demons had indeed left the man. We can only imagine the excitement and bewilderment in the minds of the onlookers in watching this large herd of pigs angrily and violently run headlong over a cliff.

When the townspeople heard about what had occurred, they rushed to the scene (verse 35). Their response to this strange incident shows mixed emotions of awe and anger. They were in awe to see that this uncontrollable and violent man was now sane and controlled in his behavior. Something had radically happened that brought about a change in his life. This very likely was a great source of relief and hope in the minds of many in the area. On the other hand, these townspeople could not overlook the huge herd of dead pigs in the lake. Some have suggested that these pigs were the town’s

source of meat. If that be the case, this would have been an economic crisis in that community. This would have explained why “they pleaded with Jesus to leave their region” (verse 17). From another angle, the undeniable and inexplicable events may have simply been overwhelming, too much for these residents to comfortably take in.

Demons and evil spirits are first-century vernacular and are for the most part no longer used to describe physical and mental conditions of individuals. Yet we can still glean some truth from this miracle of Jesus and these ancient words. Judging from the seemingly continuous array of violent acts like kidnapping, rape, drive-by shootings, mass murders, and all the other cruel things that human beings do against other human beings, demons and evil spirits seem to me to be fairly accurate descriptions of people’s behavior. Jesus understood the heart as being deceitful, out of which come evil thoughts leading to “sexual sins, thefts, murders, adultery, greed, evil actions, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance and foolishness” (Mark 7:21-22). Regardless of terminology, one thing is for sure. Christ makes a difference in the human heart.

A final note of celebration in this passage is that after all the commotion of the day was over, the demon-possessed man was free. Hallelujah! This man who had probably spent a good part of his life being a victim of public shame and rejection by his peers, in addition to suffering from mental and physical anguish, was now free. This man was not only amazing

to the community but amazing to himself. See the change in this man with your mind’s eye as Mark says that he was “fully dressed and completely sane” (Mark 5:15). He was a living testimony of the power of Christ to give new life. Jesus now gave him the opportunity to share the good news of God’s grace and mercy with others.

When have you felt that God delivered you out of something?

A Witness for Christ

Jesus’ mission in the area was now complete. Verse 18 tells us that he climbed into a boat ready to depart, only to notice that the once demon-possessed man wanted to go with him. Obviously, the Lord had made a powerful impression on this man. Jesus had affected his life both spiritually and physically. What exactly this man would do on Jesus’ team was debatable. Yet the influence of Jesus on his life is seen in that he “pleaded” with the Lord to let him go along (verse 18). The fact that he was ready to leave his homeland and follow Jesus again shows the difference Jesus had made on his life. However, and despite his urgent and heartfelt plea, Jesus would not allow this man to go with him. This was not rude or arrogant on the part of our Lord. Instead, Jesus knew that a greater purpose would be served if the man stayed in his homeland. This man who was once lost but now found would become an extension of the Gospel in this Gentile region.

The Lord instructed him to “Go home to your own people” (verse 19). This

advice serves as a biblical foundation and plan for world evangelism. Any attempt to reach and convince others must begin with ourselves. Jesus told the first disciples to begin their ministry in Jerusalem, then move to the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It would undoubtedly be through the excitement of this one Gentile convert that an entire region would hear the good news of God's redeeming love. Never underestimate the power of one burning heart! John Wesley's private experience at a place called Aldersgate in which he felt his heart strangely warmed became the spark that brought spiritual and moral revival to England and America. Wesley is said to have told other ministers that if they would but build a fire of enthusiasm for Christ, people would come from miles around to watch it burn.

What specifically would be this man's message? First, he would no doubt tell the people of that region what the Lord had done for him. It would be a living and personal testimony gone public. He would likely explain where he used to be and where he was now. His saneness of mind and heart coupled with a healed body would be a sign that confirmed the truth and power of Christ. It is hard to argue with results. And he would tell people about how the Lord had shown mercy upon him.

This man's life story was a record of hurt, abuse, and rejection. He was an outcast, a "broken" person, an undesirable. Yet Jesus confronted his pain and showed him mercy. This once broken man would now become a witness for Christ and a bearer of good news.

The healing stories of Jesus always show us the hands-on approach of God's love. It is in narratives like this one that we see the human side of Jesus sympathizing and empathizing with our pain and sorrow. Jesus is not afraid to confront our hurt. The Lord sees our torment and calls it out by name. Jesus looks at the broken heart and commands peace in the midst of the storm.

Use this coming week as an opportunity to consciously reflect on God's healing presence in your life. Look back on those positive things that have happened in your life that clearly were not brought about by human effort. Be grateful for a God who not only sees but speaks healing and wholeness to our brokenness.

How grateful are you for God's blessings in your life?

Healing God, thank you for love that sees our hurts and speaks wholeness to our brokenness. May we go that others might know the wonders of your love; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.