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Mark 5:1-20

TIME FOR YOU TO LEAVE, JESUS

As an expression of gratitude, a fund-raiser was held to raise support for further ministry. The dynamic demonstration of the effectiveness of the ministry was ample reason to do whatever the townspeople could to extend its influence. Well, actually there was no fund-raiser held. But they threw him a big fish dinner to make sure he knew how much they appreciated what he had done for one and all. A certificate of appreciation from the town council was presented. Hmm, no, there was no big dinner or presentation. A wholly appropriate and understandable response was to bring to him others that might also benefit from his ministry, so they went out and brought all who were sick or who had other problems to come see him with great hopes that he would do an encore of his mighty act that had changed the life of one poor soul so dramatically. Actually no, they did not bring others to him. Then they at least told him to stay and enjoy some relaxing time on the Gerasene beach, to be rejuvenated for further ministry. Well, that didn't happen either. What is their response? They begin to beg: "It's time for you to leave, Jesus. We urge you, we beg of you, go away, leave us alone."

Why is there no attraction to him as a result of the wonderful feat he performed? Why is there no gratitude for what had been done? Why is there a desire for this to be an end rather than the beginning of a relationship with this dynamic person named Jesus? He had just brought wholeness to a person who had suffered under a difficult illness – well it is presented as more than an illness. The man had an unclean spirit or multiple spirits, something demonic that dominated him, that caused him to dwell in a living death among the tombs. He howled like an animal and injured himself with stones. It doesn't really matter if demons are literal or figurative once someone is possessed. Many of the things that can take over our lives could be good things like work, food, or the internet. But they become destructive at the point they take over and dominate, bringing about the loss of the whole for the sake of the particular.

The spirits dominating the man in the story were so powerful that even the townspeople's strategy of using shackles and chains couldn't keep the brokenness contained. Unable to free the man of what dominated him, they were also unable to control where it might show up. They had somehow accommodated themselves to this unpleasant situation. But the man was so dominated by the presence of the spirits, that his identity was overshadowed by them. When Jesus asks the man his name, the spirits answer giving the name, 'Legion.' It was the word for a unit of five to six thousand Roman soldiers, the most powerful force that the people of that age would have known. But the healing power of God was more powerful than that. The liberating power of God was stronger than this dominating presence.

In fact, before the townspeople are begging Jesus to leave, this dominating, destructive spirit equated with a whole legion of Roman soldiers begs of Jesus that he wouldn't banish them but would let them enter a herd of swine instead. This is actually one of the bible scenes most filled with hope. The portrayal of evil begging at the feet of Jesus ought to make us want to stand and sing songs of praise. God has entered the world in Jesus Christ,

and here is indication that nothing on earth or even from the pit of hell can stand against the power of God's grace at work. The unclean spirits want to take up residence in what Jewish folks would have considered unclean animals. Jesus accepts their proposal, but he defeats their purpose. Upon entering the swine, Legion's destructive nature turns on itself when the swine rush down the steep bank and fall into the sea, where they drown. It's not just the name, 'Legion,' that is the military reminder in this story - there is military terminology through much of this part of the story. Knowing that brings a reminder of the drowning of the Egyptian troops that had sought to dominate and enslave God's people. Yes, a great liberating power was once again at work.

The swineherds tell the townspeople what had happened and when they come to look for themselves they see this formerly deranged man described as now clothed and in his right mind sitting with Jesus. The transformation is quite obvious. The one whose howl had haunted their nights and whose strength had broken their chains was now at peace sitting before them. It was an amazing thing. But rather than the townspeople being filled with joy, they are said to be filled with another emotion. We might think it was anger, particularly for those who felt a sense of loss because of the dead swine. But instead, we are told they were afraid. That's why they begged Jesus to leave - they were afraid. If he could bring about such a total transformation in the life of the man, what else might he do? It wasn't just the unclean spirits that were hostile to God's reign in their midst; it was all of the townspeople who showed that hostility. Sometimes people prefer even the misery they know to the mystery and the possibilities they don't know.

I have to admit that I find it a bit disconcerting that when the townspeople beg of Jesus to leave, he does so. But once again, in agreeing to their wishes, he does not give up on his own purposes. There is one more time someone begs Jesus for something in this story - this time it is the man who had been delivered of the dominating spirits. He begged to get to go with Jesus. But Jesus said, "No." He wanted the man to stay as an ongoing reminder of God's mercy at work. Even though they had begged him to leave, Jesus wanted the people of that town and region to hear and to see evidence of God's grace. What could demonstrate that more than this man who had been caught in a living death, who now could show in an amazing way what God had done for him?

There may actually be times when we are tempted to say to our Lord, "It's time for you to leave, Jesus." We may not want to admit that here in church, but when Jesus is telling us to make it a priority to work for wholeness even for the one who resides on the outskirts of society, then we might be inclined to say, "Jesus, leave us alone." When he commands us to love that neighbor that is quite frankly pretty unlovable, we might want to say, "Jesus, give us a little space here." When he says the highest priority is not moneyed interests of the wealthiest in town, but human interests of the neediest in town, then we might be saying, "Jesus, I give you Sundays, but when you try to move into my priorities on the other days of the week, I'm not sure I want you around." When he says for us to be more generous than we feel like being, we might be ready to label him 'an outsider' and send him packing. When he begins to show us how to love sacrificially, how to put ourselves on the line for those some have been willing to banish, how to risk rejection in order to work for wholeness that would enhance not just one person's life but the life of the whole community, are we ready to celebrate the ministry of the meddler? It might be more than just the unclean spirits that want to resist his reign in our lives.

This story reminds us that Jesus doesn't force his way into our lives. But neither does he give up on us when we want him to leave us the hell alone. He looks for another way for heavenly priorities and healing to move into our lives and our communities. When we close the front door even in his face, our gracious Lord is willing to pass the message to someone else who might get the message through in another way. What he looks for is someone who has something to say about how much the Lord has done for them and what mercy the Lord has shown them. Is there anyone who could be described in that way here today?

You might not want to hear this, but Jesus may be saying that he not only wants to change us as individuals, he wants us to reach out to the very community who has rejected his ways and perhaps rejected us to show them the transformative love of God. When we hear what he wants of us, we might suddenly be interested instead in holding a big fund-raiser to support Christ's ministry or at least a fish dinner to express our gratitude to him. But he wants more than that to happen within and through us. His love wants to bring more healing. His grace isn't finished with us or with the broader community. When the man in the gospel story went and began to proclaim how much Jesus had done for him, by God's grace, there was a different response. Mark tells us that everyone was amazed. Indeed, we have been approached by an amazing grace, whose presence didn't always sound sweet to us, but gracefully it has found a way to keep working on us and even through us. Please don't tell it to leave from where you live and move and have your being. But even if you do, you may find out at some point just how amazing it is.