

## **CURE AT THE CLIFF**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Sunday, July 19, 2009

Scripture: Mark 5:1-20

Fresh from calming a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sets foot on the far shore and arrives in the land of the Gadarenes where a well known giant of a man emerges from the tombs there; the Gerasene demoniac as he is known. It is a remarkable healing story in which Jesus restores to his rightful mind a fellow whom no one could restrain and who went about roaring and foaming like a madman. A pagan to boot, a Gentile.

I have to confess that I take up this healing story with some fear and trembling. Primarily because I am not quite sure how you hear healing stories. A few years ago I was preaching and teaching at a conference in Montreat, North Carolina, and I was talking about this particular text in a class after preaching on it.

All through the class a man at the back of the room sat cross armed and looking rather perturbed. Now I have learned that nothing is worse than an angry Presbyterian sitting cross armed in the back of the room. Charles the First of England said “Nothing is more dangerous than a Presbyterian fresh off his knees.” How much more so when a Presbyterian is concerned that you are teaching something with which he disagrees.

He introduced himself as a physician in a small town in South Carolina where he was also an elder in the Presbyterian Church. He said very bluntly, “Don’t ever preach on that passage from Mark again.” In fact, you can leave all those healing stories out. You ministers should never preach on them. They never happened, and all you do is raise false hopes for people. You shouldn’t do that. We doctors have to go around and pick up the pieces of people you leave with shattered hopes.”

Well, he has a point to make if your only expectation of a healing story is its literal replication today. But I would suggest that the healing stories in Mark’s gospel can be heard at more than that level alone.

Let me say at the outset, however, there is no getting around the fact that one of the ways in which Jesus came to be known in his day was as a healer, one who went about restoring wholeness and health to those who did not have it.

The Hebrew word for salvation at its root means, wholeness and healing. And there is ample evidence in the gospels that there is restorative power in the love of God. I have no doubt that there are witnesses to that healing power sitting right here this morning.

So one level on which we can hear these healing stories is at a literal level. Jesus restored a man who was manic to say the least, perhaps hallucinatory, or even dealing with multiple personalities and healed him. His demons were legion, but they proved no match to the power of God’s who meant for him wholeness and health.

I will not question that. I have lived long enough and watched closely enough to know that there are some things that even medicine cannot explain.

But I would also suggest that there are other levels of entry into this story.

One of the things that we should not miss is the fact that Jesus is headed into Gentile country. His healing power is not for his own people alone, it is a gospel of hope and reconciliation for all people and its blessings are meant to be shared by everyone.

Another thing we shouldn't miss in the story is the fact that the powers of earth are challenged by the powers of the kingdom of heaven in this confrontation with legion demons. When Jesus sets foot on the land of the Gerasenes it is like a military landing, he comes ashore to attack the strong man which has possessed the life of one who can live a better life, free of demons.

These are all issues that are part of the back story of this account, and important to note, but what really catches my attention this time around is something else. What really strikes me about this story is what happens when you step back from it, and look at the quite amazing fact that Jesus was even willing to engage this man who was powerful and strong and out of control. Who knows what might happen if Jesus confronted him? I mean how often do you approach a person who is out of control whom you see on the street or on the bus, or on the subway. The police approach these people with tasers drawn. Yet Jesus approaches with a different kind of power. It is a risky proposition to say the least.

Those of you who live here in New York know what I'm talking about. If you move here from somewhere else in the country, you have to learn to be a New Yorker. I've watched myself do it, evolve over time. Change in demeanor and form. It starts slowly and then takes over as you do time on the street.

I started out a mushy Midwesterner, an easy touch with a gentle disposition toward others, but I have learned how to be tough and survive in the city. On the subway, for instance, I mind my own business, I do not engage other people, I read a book or look at the newspaper or read the advertisements, or fiddle with my Blackberry, but I do not engage other people. If there is an argument between a taxi driver and a pedestrian on the street, or worse yet, two taxi drivers, I know not to get involved.

Every time I go out, there will be homeless souls that I will see begging even in the best of neighborhoods. I am prepared for that now. I have rehearsed my stock answer. I say, I have no money as the coins jingle in my pocket. People's problems and needs are inescapable in this city. But you learn to be inured to it, and you do not get involved.

The streets, after all, are filled with demoniacs, with people who have lost their mind, people who are alcoholics and are down and out, people who are doing drugs and shooting up with the money you give them. I know it sounds harsh, but I just don't stop any more.

I have learned to give them nothing. I mean where would you draw the line? And who knows where the money will go?

The problem with stopping and paying attention to these folks, I have learned, is that whatever it is that they have gets on you. Do you know what I mean? They smell, and they're dirty, and God knows whether they are going to have a fit, or try and rob you or whether they will say a word of blessing to you... God knows.

But I know that in every one of those encounters, if I pay attention, something of them sticks. Something of whatever is on them gets on me, and I walk away lost in thought about a society that forgets people, or I wonder where those children that man says are his are going to spend the night, or why I've given *this one* a dollar and not *that one*, or what the pregnant girl with the track marks on her arms will do next... that kind of thing. It gets on you and stays with you and haunts you. Which is why I am so surprised that Jesus was willing to let what that demoniac had, get on him. Jesus, after all, is so perfect and so pure and so clean. But here's this crazy guy with demons in this story and Jesus stops and messes with him.

A couple of weeks ago Sarah mentioned our church has been sponsoring a man from Jamaica, Roxroy Salmon. Roxroy is an undocumented alien who is about to be deported. He has lived in this country for the past thirty years. He has a mother who has Alzheimer's disease here in the U.S., an American wife, and five children all born here, and all American citizens. It is estimated that 3.5 million U.S. citizen children have at least one parent who is undocumented.

Back in his teens, Roxroy was arrested for selling some pot on the street. His father was a dealer and had enlisted Roxroy in his business. As things go, Roxroy was convicted of a minor drug charge, non-violent, and he never served any jail time just probation, the infractions were so insignificant.

But the record stuck, and our nation post 9/11 has been a little crazy about undocumented immigrants, and our government has taken away the discretion of federal judges regarding cases like this. The judges have no choice any more but to order the deporting of people with any criminal convictions, breaking up families, even when thirty years of responsible citizenship, and children born in this country have followed.

Here at the church the Session decided to sponsor Roxroy through his deportation appeal. Folks have been to congressional offices, to the ICE office, written letters, held vigils, even had a story in the New York Daily News (of all places) about him, all of it to not much avail yet. The judge two weeks ago finally ordered Roxroy be deported. And this week his request for deferred action was denied. So some day, unless the law changes; maybe soon, maybe tomorrow, maybe this week or next, we don't know, somebody will come and Roxroy will be arrested and taken away from his wife and children and sent to Jamaica, a country he barely knows, for an infraction so minor that if they were going to impose this penalty on our kids passing acquaintance with illegal substances, there would be a huge cry about the injustice of it.

And I know, immigration is confusing, and its messy, and case by case, it's too complicated. I know. But the idea of a Jamaican man needing to be deported, when he has children to support and a mother to care for and a wife who is a citizen and thirty years of responsible and peaceful living in this country... to take him in handcuffs to a deportation center and then send him to a land he barely knows... well, there's just something wrong about that. Legion demons on the loose!

All I can tell you is that getting involved in Roxroy's case has changed us as a congregation. It has made the whole issue of immigration less easy, less neat and tidy. It's not like sending pencil boxes and construction paper to school children in Africa. It's messier.

It's close up and personal and it's gotten on us, and it sticks on us, and it has made our life more difficult as a congregation, because it would be so much easier if we hadn't stopped and paid attention to this one man's plight.

The New Testament scholar Pheme Perkins writes that the business of healing causes you to change if you get involved in it. If you reach out and take the uncleanness of the world to yourself. "Healing has a mission," she writes. "It involves transformation, not merely restoration to the status quo."<sup>1</sup>

When you are called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, you are called to live in a world where there are Legion demons, and it's messy dealing with it. And you cannot help but get some of what the world has on it, on you, if you do what Jesus did and minister to the one in need.

We Presbyterians have a **Book of Order** that next to the Bible is our book of governance and identity. At the beginning of that **Book of Order** there is a statement about what we, as Christians, are called to do as bearers of Christ's name. I won't bore you with all it says, but at one particularly important point it notes,

"The church is called to be Christ's faithful evangelist, ...participating in God's activity in the world through its life for others by; healing and reconciling and binding up wounds; ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless;" and to do so (listen to this), "even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life..."

I think the church today needs more and more to risk its life for the sake of those who are in need. To be willing to dare to risk itself for the sake of those who are messy and difficult and awkward and not a part of the mainstream, people who are different from us and who don't fit in all that well.

Churches with a membership committee that only seek their own are not churches but country clubs. The church that Jesus came to establish includes a Gerasene demoniac or two or three who are healed when they are restored to community by the Christ who welcomes and embraces them.

What we see too much of these days are congregations who are only about getting other like minded folks together who will pay the bills and bear the responsibilities of keeping the institution going by serving on its committees. They are not about sharing the good news of God's love to a world that is a bit crazy and possessed and materialistic and wasteful and dirty and not always in its right mind. We want folks in the church to be clean and all fixed up before we will approach them. Jesus, on the other hand, wasn't too concerned about getting on him whatever it was that put others off.

The church ought to be more like that. Risking its life for the sake of the not so acceptable in order that it may fulfill its calling to be disciples of him who was not at all acceptable, not acceptable even unto a cross, where he gave his life for us.

I've just come back from a week of preaching in Chautauqua, New York at that marvelous Chautauqua Institution, where the week was devoted to the theme, "Faith, Belief, and State of Mind." A wonderful six days of superb speakers on mental health, medicine and religion.

As I say, I was the preacher for the week and each day after I preached, I greeted people on the back porch of the Amphitheater where those who wanted to speak a personal word of response to my sermon could do so. Every day a rather tall, older gentleman in a Members Only jacket like Ahmadinejad's kept coming to say a word of appreciation to me. He seemed a little nervous and ill at ease, and reminded me of Wally Cox that comedian who made a living looking worried. On Friday, the last day, this man asked me if I could give my opinion about a problem in his church.

It seems there was a man in his small rural congregation, a man in his mid-forties who had started coming to worship. He was gay, and pretty soon the man brought his partner as well. He didn't ask to join the church, but he did seem to appreciate the warmth of the welcome that he received from so many people in the congregation. And that was genuine, if a bit uncomfortable for the members because the man also had AIDS and was clearly struggling with his health.

My inquisitor said that the gay man never "recanted," that was his word, "...never recanted his lifestyle. I'm seventy nine years old," he said, "and I've never married, and I've had my problems to face, too, but we won't go into that. But this man never recanted," the fellow said. "I tried to get him to do so, but he wouldn't."

"A couple of weeks ago he died, and I couldn't believe what happened," the fellow said. "The church gave a funeral for him. Invited in his partner and treated him like family. They even had a reception for him. I tried to get him to recant, but he wouldn't. So I just couldn't go to the funeral," he said. It was hypocritical of the church to do that, ...we have to preserve the fellowship. We have to preserve the fellowship."

"What I want to know," he asked, "is whether you think it was right for the church to have that service. What would you have done?"

And I knew in that moment that I was looking at seventy nine years of hurt and woundedness and struggle behind that loaded question. I wondered if anyone knows just

how deep is the well of pain from which this fellow drew that question, it was so much more than just wondering what I would do.

I struggled in my own mind for a moment about what to say to him. And what I found myself saying was, “You’re not going to like what I’m going to say.” Because it really doesn’t matter what I would do in that case, the real question is that familiar, worn out question that suddenly seemed the only relevant issue: “What would Jesus do?” And, of course, we know the answer to that.

You cannot get close to those who are most broken by this world if you are not willing to allow some of what is on them get on you. Personally, I think the church is at its best when it risks its life, like Jesus did, for the sake of the least likely, the ones on the margin, the people that no one wants to look at, nor much less touch.

I wish there were an easier way to follow him. Lord knows I have tried to find an easier way. But it just keeps coming down to this. Those who want to *save* their life will *lose* it, and those who *lose* their life for his sake will *find* it.

I just thought you ought to know how much it costs before you try to follow.

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<sup>1</sup> PHEME PERKINS, **New Interpreter's Bible**, Vol VIII. "Mark." Nashville: Abingdon, 1995. 585.