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Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON February 6, TNT: Possession, Mark 5:1-20

This week in our TNT series we consider the story of the Gerasene Demoniac. This man was possessed by a lot of demons. They went by the name Legion because there were so many. The demons made the man so wild, violent, and unruly that he wasn't suited to live in a village or city among other people. They tried to reign him in by binding and chaining him, but nothing was strong enough to do the job. Somehow they managed to exile him to the tombs. That's where he lived, and we see not only was he a danger to others but also himself as he cut himself with stones.

Even from a distance the demons know who Jesus is and run to Him in fear, begging for mercy. They know they are no match for Him and that He is going to cast them out of the man. Hoping to stay in the region they simply ask to be cast into a herd of about 2,000 pigs. Jesus obliges them and the pigs then run headlong into a lake and kill themselves.

The man is healed. He wants to come with Jesus. Instead he is told to tell people about his deliverance. We are told he spreads this message throughout the Decapolis. This is no small deal. The Decapolis is a cluster of 10 cities, a large area. Essentially, he goes from madman to evangelist in a day.

This is an incredible transformation. It has so much to tell us about the nature of transforming. What we need to do in order to fully appreciate it is look at it not just in the context of the demoniac, but in our own context as well. We believe Jesus still transforms, but it has to look different than it did in that day and time.

It has to look different because the demoniac had something we can't. He met Jesus eye to eye, person to person, in the flesh. Jesus was physically present with him. We can't have this because Jesus has ascended to God and is no longer here. What we have now is the presence of the Holy Spirit. Yet nevertheless we can translate this moment then to moments now.

Perhaps the simplest and first thing to take from this incident is the necessity of an encounter with Jesus. There are some transformations that need to happen, and like with the demoniac, the only way they will is if we have an encounter with Jesus. It is His love, witness, and power that works the wonder in our hearts and ultimately our lives. Sometimes people are fortunate and that encounter in the blink of an eye does what Jesus did for the demoniac. It transforms quickly and wholly.

We see this at times today as well. Someone comes to faith and as the Holy Spirit comes on them they are changed immediately and completely. Often this is in the form of a long held habit or addiction. In an eye blink that temptation, cravings, and compulsions are gone. They are delivered from their affliction. These moments are inspiring and amazing. They demonstrate just how powerful and awesome the God we serve is.

But to assume this is the only way it happens (immediate, quick, and full) would be to miss what is the majority of reality. For most of us transformation isn't a moment in time where everything changes on a dime. It's a journey. It takes a process and time to achieve. Yes, instant change does happen, but it's not the norm. So we have to look beyond that to see how God works in real life and real time. What doesn't change is that the key is an encounter with Jesus. We just have to know where to look.

Sometimes Jesus shows up in a friend, co-worker, loved one, teammate, even a stranger. The Spirit inspires someone to compassionately and graciously note something in us that is broken, sinful, or "off". They do it out of genuine concern. This is Jesus working to help us see past our blind spots. And let's remember, it's not only Christians that God uses. In the Old Testament God used pagan nations that even mocked God to accomplish purposes to discipline Israel. If we believe that the Spirit is knocking constantly at every heart, we can trust that no matter who it is, if the question or direction is correct God is at the center of it.

Sometimes Jesus shows up in conviction of the heart. The Spirit shows us something where we aren't in line with God, and kindly both convicts and humbles us. Let's face it, most of us don't want to look in the mirror and admit where we are sinful, broken, or wrong. It's hard and painful. Pride creeps in and we put up walls to deny what is happening. But God still reaches out. We are convicted and humbled, and this is the gateway to transformation. A problem never acknowledged won't be fixed.

Sometimes Jesus shows up in those who companion us in our journey of transformation. He is present in each and every person who supports us. Who love us. Who encourage us. Who guide us. Who advise us. Who hold us. Jesus is in all of this. He shows up. When we embrace that encounter we transform into who God is calling us to be.

Knowing this is critical. If all we look for is the "bolt from the blue" change, we can miss how God is working all through our lives.

For most of us transformation is a process. We need to look for God in more than one place.

What's even more significant is that all of us are called to the same mission as the demoniac. When we are changed what does God

want us to do? God wants us to tell our story. We share what God has done and hope it inspires others to engage that same relationship that will change them. Recognizing how God shows up in the journey takes what many see as “pie in the sky” nonsense to genuine, practical “rubber meets the road” sense.

Most people who don't already believe have a hard time with our more abstract, God whammies things and makes everything better all at once notions. What makes more sense is sharing how God uses people. So and so made this comment. I felt something in my heart that I can't explain but it made me realize something needs to change. When I began seeking to change these people came into my orbit and have helped me. All of this is God opening my eyes and inspiring people who have listened to help me choose transformation. This is practical, flesh and blood, real time, honest realities others can relate to. And hopefully see God's work for what it is. Honest, faithful, and grounded.

So frequently these encounters work in tandem. We encounter Jesus in the person who holds us accountable. We encounter Jesus in the conviction that brings the humility to hear that accountability. We encounter Jesus in all of those in our journey who then partner with us to achieve the transformation we're called to achieve. One leads to the other. The grand benefit is that we realize we don't simply see Jesus in one face or person. Because the Spirit is always acting, Jesus is all around us, all the time. We can see Jesus in every person and every situation. What a tremendous gift!

At this point we've neglected part of the story. We've missed the reaction to the miracle.

The people react in a legitimate way. They are scared. Who wouldn't be? This possessed man has been freed and 2,000 pigs committed suicide. That's a very real and serious incident. The one who caused it should rightly be viewed with awe. But their reaction beyond this is interesting.

They have seen the results. This man has been made at peace. He is delivered. One might think that past the fear might be a recognition that if Jesus could deliver this man, He may be able to right some other wrongs in their community. Why not invite Him to take some time and help out some other circumstances.?

Because of the cost.

Remember Paul. Folks weren't really keen on believing his conversion. His history made them suspicious and rightly so. This is similar but different. The cost if they trusted Paul may be their safety which he put to rest. The cost to let Jesus come to town and keep righting wrongs here may be more than they are willing to bear.

2,000 pigs were more than pigs. They were money. They were a support to the financial stability to that region. Now they are gone. There is a question that is sensible. If the cost of healing this man was these pigs, what might be the cost of anything else He does? Can we endure it? Is it worth it?

This is the other side of transformation. There is a cost. Are we willing to pay it? Are others? In this case, it seems they were not. They clearly wanted the man to be delivered to be rid of his nuisance. But when it cost them livestock, that seemed a bridge too far. When you and I transform there is a cost. To us there is the personal cost of dying to some portion of ourselves. To others there are things we stop doing that they'd rather us continue in. Perhaps there are new behaviors that they find off putting. In the employer/employee relationship, perhaps there are practices participated in that seemed alright at the time but now are distasteful. If the change of conscience meddles with the bottom line, a stern consequence could easily follow. “I'm glad you are a better person, but your new values don't match the bottom line of our company.”

Wherever in our lives, transformation always carries with it a cost.

Are we willing to pay it? Are those around us? The bottom line is that if the change brings us closer to God, the cost is always worth it. Always. If not in this world then the next.

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And the following is key.

God doesn't ask us to do anything God can't/won't do. God wants us to transform. God wants our change. God wants us better and redeemed. What cost did God pay for all of this? What was the cost of salvation? What was the cost of the Holy Spirit coming? The cross.

There has been no greater price paid than what God paid on our behalf. The cost most of us pay for transformation is far less than the torturous death of crucifixion Jesus paid. And He didn't do it for His own transformation. He did it for ours. Whatever most of us pay in terms of actual consequence is peanuts. The communion we celebrate today is a joyful and reverent reminder of the depth of God's love for us and God's desire to draw us close. May that be our constant assurance and hope.

BIBLE STUDY: Acts chapter 9 is the famous conversion story of Saul (Paul). We had a brief interlude in his story throughout chapter 8, but here we see him front and center again. Luke is intentional to make a serious point so that we understand the significance of what is about to happen to Saul. He is bent on stamping out this new sect of “Jesus followers” in Judaism known as The Way.

As the chapter unfolds we see several things about this man. That Ananias has trepidation about healing him because he has established such a vicious reputation among the believers. Saul has been busy. We also see that Saul has an authority granted to him by the leadership in the Jewish community. He gets letters to be sent to the synagogues of Damascus regarding his mission to gather and jail men and women who believe in Jesus. Saul is devout in his faith, passionate about his mission, and using the proper chain of command to make sure he has the backing to accomplish his goal.

That he would go about his mission this way makes complete sense. Were he to just show up unannounced and start snatching people out of a synagogue, he may meet with resistance. If he is unknown his authority is questionable. On the other hand if he has these letters from the High Priest, and if they are delivered prior to his arrival or even upon his arrival, the congregation of the synagogue might be persuaded to not only grant him authority but also to help him identify followers of The Way.

Saul is an image of calculation, authority, purpose, laser focus, and strength. Which makes what happens next all the more impressive.

He is struck blind by a bright light. He hears the voice of Jesus asking him why he is so fervent in persecuting Him. He is told he'll be given further instructions when he arrives in Damascus. We find that in a vision he is informed that Ananias will restore his sight. Now the image of Saul is completely different. He is helpless. He must be led around by the hand because he is blind. That Saul neither ate nor drank is a sign that he was worried, perhaps even downright afraid. We know he was praying, so perhaps this was an intentional fast hoping for God to help him sort things out. It could also be that he was simply so concerned that his appetite left him. Either way, Saul is in darkness, vulnerable, and essentially left for three days to contemplate what on earth these "instructions" would be.

There is also a rich symbolism in his three days of darkness. This is not unlike Jesus' three days in the tomb. Saul is in his own tomb of sorts. Left to sort things out in darkness. And we find that on the other end of the ordeal, he has died to himself, been resurrected, and through the Holy Spirit resurrected in power.

In giving three days for Saul to stew, God shows a great wisdom. Imagine you are Saul. You've been struck blind, confronted by Jesus, and told you'll get "further instructions" down the road. Helpless and blind, three days feels like an eternity. If you've ever been given that kind of open ended statement that provokes fear and worry, likely your brain may not have been your friend. The mind can conceive every possible negative outcome. We can think and think ourselves into a depression. If you're anything like me, eventually you get to a point of resignation. Resignation that whatever is coming is fine. Whatever it is we'll deal with. The ultimate question is simply "what is the outcome/answer?" That becomes the real honest and desired moment.

Meanwhile, Ananias is given marching orders by God. His reaction is understandable. Saul is a terror so why would he want to help him? God gives him, and by default us as Luke tells the story, instructions and perhaps even a little "her comes karma" kind of nudge. He reveals that Saul will essentially become an apostle of great power. He also lets Ananias know that God will show Saul how much suffering he's about to have to endure in the course of this new calling. Between the two, Ananias is obedient.

In a complete 180 degree turnaround, when Ananias heals Saul's blindness and tells him he has come to do this plus bring the Holy Spirit to bear on and in Saul. Saul's response is to immediately become baptized and embark on a new mission completely opposite his initial one. No longer is he seeking to persecute Christians, he is seeking to make them. No longer is he the one doing the persecuting, he is about to become the persecuted.

I believe we can make another assumption about the interaction between Saul and Ananias. It was more than just the healing and Holy Spirit. There must have been a conversation. Remember, Saul was told he'd receive instruction. What we read is simply information. "These two things are going to happen." Instruction is geared at what he will need to do. This is the notion that he is called to become the apostle and spread the gospel message.

Not much is made of Ananias. The more memorable Ananias is the one in Chapter 5 who is struck dead because of lying to Peter about how much money he was putting in the offering. I think it's important for us to recognize some things here.

Ananias may have never made another convert, but make no mistake this is what he did with Saul. He was the catalyst that moved Saul from confrontation with Christ to believer and apostle. He was an instrument of God to push Saul in the right direction to allow God to fully engulf his passions and energies. For each of us this is an important reality. It can be easy to dismiss our efforts as meager. It may be even easy to not engage what God is calling us to do because we think it's a drop in the bucket in our eyes. But what about Ananias and Saul? Ananias was used of God in this one single act to push one of the greatest apostles into action and ministry, and essentially start the Gentile church which is what we would likely identify most with today.

Never underestimate what God can do with even the slightest of any of our acts of obedience.

We immediately see both of God's encouragements to Ananias come to pass. Saul immediately begins preaching. It seems he was fairly effective in convincing many that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. This is both surprising and unsurprising at the same time. Unsurprising is his ability to wield and interpret scripture in a way that demonstrates Jesus is the Christ. Saul's background was such that he was an expert in the Law and would have known the Hebrew scriptures inside and out. With his newfound insight and passion certainly he would have been persuasive.

On the other hand, we see the reaction of many other Jews to Saul and this speaks to his persuasiveness being actually surprising. Remember, this is the man who was stirring up people to anger and violence against these Christians. He was the ringleader to round them up and jail them. Saul is at the head of the charge against this new blasphemous, heretical sect of Jews. He's convinced people of the faithfulness and necessity of his mission. Now he has become precisely what he had despised and whipped up so many others to despise as well.

He is a traitor, a turncoat. He is now the enemy and how much more anger and vitriol would they have towards him after all he'd done to convince them how terrible these followers of The Way are? Immediately in both Damascus and Jerusalem there are plots to kill Saul. He is hunted and hated, just as he had himself done that same hunting and hating. He is beginning to see the kind of suffering that lies ahead for him as he embraces his new role.

As one might expect, he is not exactly welcomed with open arms by the existing believers. They know his history and are not convinced of his genuineness. Even the apostles in Jerusalem need convincing. Who convinces them? Barnabas from Chapter 4. This reminds us of Luke's intentionality in storytelling. Barnabas was mentioned as a man of genuine faithfulness earlier in the book to set up a contrast for the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Here we see additional reason for Luke to bring him to our attention. He is the one convincing the apostles of Saul's authenticity and it answers why he would have been credible to do so. We know in the eyes of the apostles that Barnabas is already established as faithful and reliable.

That there is friction with the apostles though also sets the stage for the relationship between Saul and the Jerusalem church down the

road. There is fairly constant friction, particularly as we peruse the letters of Paul (Saul). The Jerusalem church, largely Jewish believers, was continually trying to convince Gentile believers that they had to first become a certain degree of observantly Jewish in order to become Christian. This was a constant thorn in his ministry as he understood that if we are called to life in the Spirit, and the Law could never satisfy our relationship before God, it made no sense to try to force any semblance of it on people who never had a reference point to it to begin with. Galatians is a prime example of this conflict.

As this portion of the chapter draws to a close, we may be given by Luke a glimpse into just how much trouble Saul had been causing. We are told that the believers in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace that allowed them to thrive even further. This is very likely due to the fact that the ringleader, the pot stirrer, the instigator, Saul, has now traded teams.

One final point on the conflict between Saul and the Jews revolves around an extension of the Old Testament. The Old Testament issue with Israel was that they were continually missing God's intention and unrepentant over the fact. In the New Testament we can forget this pattern. What we see here highlighted in the apostles and now Paul is a continuation of this same problem. These apostles, now the new prophets, have been trying to draw Israel into right relation with God through the Messiah. As Stephen pointed out to his own demise, the pattern to persecute the prophets and miss what God is trying to do continues on here in the New Testament as well. The scene shifts pretty dramatically to Peter and his ministry. While it takes up quite a few verses, overall there are a couple simple points that Luke is making.

Once again, Luke is fleshing out just how similar the apostles are to Jesus in the working of signs and wonders. A little at a time we are being shown the mirror reflection of what Jesus and they had in common in miracle working. First Peter shows us the inspiration and power of his words. Then the lame man is healed outside the temple. In Chapter 8 we see demons exorcised. Now here in chapter 9 there is the raising from the dead. "Tabitha get up" is a very close cousin to "Lazarus come out." The apostles, commissioned by Jesus Himself are uniquely empowered to carry on His ministry and build His church.

There is also now emerging a very clear understanding of what Jesus meant when He told them they would do greater works than He. It is important here to also remember that while many today claim that this affirmation is given to themselves as modern day followers of Christ, this isn't likely the case. That comment was given specifically to Jesus' inner circle of disciples, whom He would empower through the Spirit to build His church after His return to heaven. This is the fruit of that promise.

Jesus in His ministry used signs and wonders to try and get the Jewish people to see His identity as the Messiah. To bring them to a genuine repentance before God and live rightly before Him. In some regards He succeeded, but in large form He had difficulty. Think about the feeding of the thousands when they came because of His miracles, got fed heartily, and then when He tried to teach them rejected the teaching leaving only the inner circle. There were many who wanted the miracle but missed the message.

Here we see something different. Yes, there are those who stand against the apostles for their ministry. Yet at the same time over and over Luke communicates that there are those who are not only attracted by the miracles, but also believe the message. They are changed not just as individuals, but also are banding together in community with one another. Precisely what Jesus said would come to pass is coming to pass. The message is being received and His church is being built. They are successfully carrying on, and expanding what Jesus began.

We are called to the same today. Jesus began the work of redeeming creation in His time. Our call is to keep that work going by introducing others to Him, and encouraging them to change the world by loving others as themselves, and loving our God.