

“TOO MUCH RELIGION?”

Luke 8:26-39

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Ken was depressed over the doctor's diagnosis. His type of leukemia was aggressive; he most likely had only a couple years to live. Months of chemotherapy lay ahead of him, and if he was fortunate, a bone marrow transplant might also be possible. Suddenly the future was fearfully uncertain --- and uncomfortable and painful --- due to the awful disease. So Ken withdrew within himself and away from friends and family. His wife and children felt shut out and quite powerless in the face of this situation.

So many things can separate us from one another and from God: illness and the fears that spring from it, despair over financial hardship, and even our own weakness in the face of sickness or trouble. All these things and more make us want to hide away from those closest to us, as well as from God's community of faith.

Our Gospel lesson from Luke opens with a man who has been hiding away, separated from his family and community. He exhibits symptoms of what we might today call manic-depressive mental illness. The fact that he is living in the cemetery signals to us that he is already living the life of the walking dead. His world is chaotic, for an internal force has driven him out of his clothes, out of his house, out of his community, and even out of his mind.

Pause for a moment and reflect on that chaos. How closely does this connect with your own experience? When have you been pushed to the brink by internal noise and confusion? Are you suffering today from legions of stressors that are of demonic proportions?

The man in our story has completely lost his humanity. He is completely at the mercy of outside forces that keep him from human community and seem not even to allow him to speak for himself. When Jesus arrives, the man falls at Jesus' feet and a demon within asks a very important question: "*What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?*" What will Jesus do? How will Jesus deal with this tormented man? The magnitude of the task is made clear by the name given to the man: Legion. A legion was the basic military unit of the Roman army. The fact that the Gospel of Mark tells us that there were over 2,000 pigs on the hillside suggests that the man may have had 2,000 demons oppressing him. The demons are as powerful as a Roman legion. Who can stand against such force?

From the moment Jesus steps ashore, his intentions are clear. Jesus will restore this man to his humanity and to his community. Not only can Jesus deal with the demons that haunt this man, he also has the power to cast them into the abyss, the deepest pits of death. The powers of sickness, isolation and despair have met their match in Jesus! Jesus casts the demons out and

they go into a herd of pigs nearby. The herd of pigs then rushes headlong into the sea. Note that Jesus does not command the demons to rush into the sea; this is the work of the demons themselves. They can only destroy. Jesus heals, restores and saves.

Think about the fact that the legions of Rome were oppressing the people of Judea at the time of Jesus, and that pigs were bred in order to serve the Roman army of occupation. After all, who else was eating this pork? It certainly wasn't the Jewish Pharisees! The Romans were the oppressors of a whole people. They were taking away the voice and self-control of a whole nation. If Legion is a commentary on Rome, then Jesus is subtly or not so subtly commanding the empire to leave and restore a whole people to their right mind. The new world that Jesus brings offers both personal and political transformation.

In the next scene, the man, Legion, is sitting at the feet of Jesus. He is "clothed and in his right mind." He is calm. The chaos is gone, and the man's integrity has returned. He is at peace with himself and with God. Note that the man is "seated at Jesus' feet." Luke has utilized his term elsewhere to describe someone who is studying under a rabbi. Paul "sat at the feet" of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Mary will sit at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39). The once-tormented man is healed, literally saved, and is now studying under Jesus.

A good fairy tale would end here, with the words, "And they all lived happily ever after." But that's not what happens in our story. Our story is not a fairy tale. The Bible deals with real people and real life issues.

The man from whom the demons have gone out is a happy camper. But not everyone is happy. When the pigs run over the cliff and into the lake and are drowned, the pig farmers are mighty unhappy. It is very nice to see Legion clothed and in his right mind and listening attentively to Jesus' teaching, but these farmers have lost their livelihood, and they are not at all happy about it.

Change is always a mixed bag. What is good news for one person may be bad news for somebody else. I had a policeman tell me in all seriousness one time that if too many people started following the teachings of Jesus and got their lives together, and crime went way down; he might be out of a job! I know a man who is an alcoholic. For years his drinking had caused problems for his wife and children. Finally, the man started going to Alcoholics Anonymous, and his life was dramatically changed. He became a devoted husband and father. He was home for meals. He attended the kids' school functions. The family found that it had more money to spend as well. Things looked great, indeed. But alas, the family began to have major problems, and eventually the man's wife left him. She had gotten used to living with a drunk; she was not able to handle a husband who was sober.

The power of Jesus upsets the balance of things. When we begin to take Jesus seriously, our lives change. It is a big adjustment for us sometimes. It may be an even bigger adjustment for our loved ones. We all know how to protect our pocketbooks. When it comes to financial appeals, all of us have ways of handling the letters, the e-mails, and the phone calls. The reason we have asked people to give their faith witness as part of the capital campaign rather than simply describing the need and asking you for money is because we see this campaign as a spiritual matter. When the Spirit of God gets involved in our lives some things have to change. We have to re-evaluate our priorities. That may upset our economic appletart for a while as we respond to what we feel God wants us to do.

Someone recently said, "This is an expensive church to belong to!" It is true, not because of what I am asking or what the committee is asking of you, but because of what God is asking of all of us. Most of the time, our emphasis at church is on getting more people more involved.

That day on the Galilean hillside, the people wanted less involvement. They felt that religion had gone too far! It was re-ordering their very lifestyle and they were not comfortable anymore. They reacted with fear; fear of the power of God. We can imagine their panic over the loss of so many pigs and so much profit. In fact, the people are so upset that they ask Jesus to go away! “We’ve had enough,” they tell Jesus in essence. There’s such a thing as **too much religion**. We don’t want to overdo it!

Do we have difficulty handling the demands of the Gospel? Again this week at Annual Conference, United Methodist pastors were ordained and agreed to serve where sent by the Bishop. Yet oftentimes that means a disruption to family life and to the family’s economic life. Not only clergy, but all of us are called to acknowledge God’s claim upon our lives. That call may mean upsetting the balance of things in many areas of our lives. Will we respond by following where God leads, or will we respond with fear and resistance as did the people in our story?

Once again, the story is not over! Jesus has healed a man. Jesus has turned a community on its ear. Now Jesus commissions the man to go and proclaim the Gospel. Having been healed by Jesus, this man becomes a disciple of Jesus.

Was this the man’s intention? Was that his desire? Not exactly. The saved man wanted to go with Jesus on his travels and to continue to sit at Jesus’ feet. After all, he still had a lot to learn about what it means to be a disciple. But instead, Jesus sends the man away to live in a new relationship with his community. From the beginning, Jesus has been at work to restore this man to his family and community. Now Jesus gives him a mission: “*Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.*” Jesus’ acts of healing and saving are meant to be a blessing not only to the man named Legion, but to the entire community.

I rather suspect that the man needed a little encouragement from Jesus before he followed through. After all, it would have been so much nicer to simply sit at Jesus’ feet and absorb more knowledge. But the Gospel always balances action and contemplation. We can never learn all there is to know about God and about the spiritual life. At the same time, the New Testament makes it clear that we learn by following. We are not called to get our act together so that we can serve. We are called to serve, and in the process we will get our act together by learning what the life of faith is all about.

I imagine the man named Legion was honest. I imagine he said that following Jesus would cost something, that if you were a pig farmer your stock portfolio could change in a hurry! I imagine he told folks that some people had a hard time with the Gospel, just as a lot of people resist the Gospel today. But I imagine he never got tired of telling people that his health had been restored and that Jesus had given him a new lease on life.

I believe that not only the man named Legion, but each of us who have encountered the risen Christ have a story to tell and a witness to share. I believe this morning that God is saying, “Charlie, tell the people how much God has done for you!” Tell people how your life has changed because of your encounter with Jesus.

While I continue to have my challenges and struggles, like the man named Legion, I never get tired of telling that story, either! When I see people in need, and hear their stories, I want to tell them about Jesus and what he has done for me, and what he can do for them. Some people tell me to go away, that they just want three dollars worth of God. Thank you very much! They don’t want to overdo it. You can get **too much religion!** After all, Jesus can quickly push us beyond our comfort zones. But others hear with open hearts and open arms and embrace the

Gospel in all its fullness. And for all who open their hearts to Jesus, he heals, he restores, and he brings new hope.

The man named Legion was healed, and we can be healed, too. All we have to do is let Jesus take charge of our lives. And when he takes charge, he will give us a mission to fulfill --- to go and proclaim the Gospel!

Too much religion? No, not really! Never be afraid to follow Jesus!

Prayer: Dear God, when we hear these words, we realize that you have the power to do great things in our lives and in our world today. Help us not to resist! And when we receive your healing, help us to share that good news with others, that all might come to know the hope that Christ brings. In his name we pray. Amen.

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