

The Wounded Healer  
Luke 8.26-39  
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In Jesus' inaugural address, when he read from Isaiah in his synagogue, he said that he brought "good news to the poor," and release to the captives. Then Jesus went out and started healing people and casting out demons. Have you been possessed by a demon? Do you know anyone who is? Some of you are thinking that I am making a joke. You know that there is no such thing as demon possession today.

Let me ask that another way. Do you have an addiction? Do you know anyone who has an addiction? I know there are demons in this world. The demons we face today are just as sinister as the ones Jesus cast out. Our addictions, our demons, are sometimes more subtle than the legion of demons in our story from Luke. We are possessed by our possessions. We are addicted to power and money. I do not need to talk about the obvious demons of chemical dependency, violence, sex abuse and internet pornography.

If you can imagine the scene of Jesus getting out of that nice fishing boat after the eventful crossing of the lake. If you did not take the opportunity of reading around our story for today, you may not be aware that it was this lake crossing at night when Jesus stilled the storm. Jesus has shown his authority over the elements of wind and water. Jesus has control over the watery abyss where the demon-possessed pigs will go.

Have you ever taken a nice boat ride on a pleasant morning after a storm? The water is calm. The sky is clear. You make shore and step off the boat and come face to face with a wild man. He comes screaming down the hill to the shore. He is naked, screaming, and smelly, of course you do not want to get close enough to smell him, but you cannot keep him away. He is one of those people who do not understand the niceties of personal space. He jumps up into your face. He has bad teeth and clearly has not seen a bath in way too long. And yet, it is this demon possessed wild man who recognizes Jesus as the "Son of the Most High God." Maybe it happens immediately, maybe it took a while for the man to calm down, either way, Jesus engages the man in conversation. "What is your name?"

Can you see this happening? The wild man comes crashing out of the bushes screaming, and Jesus calmly asks, "What's your name?" Is it the demons who respond or is there still a spark of humanity hiding within the wild man? His answer makes me weep. "Legion." Can we not identify with this wild man? Are we not possessed by a legion of demons?

The story Luke tells is not only – perhaps not even primarily – about physical healing, but about restoration of this man's identity. When the man first meets Jesus his question is not, "Who are you?" He knows he is the Son of the Most High God. His question is, "What are you going to do to me?" The demons are concerned about self-preservation. Entering a herd of pigs seems like a good idea. Unfortunately for the demons, the pigs become the means of their destruction. In the meantime, the former wild man, now sits safely at Jesus' feet, gathering his senses.

When we encounter the presence of God in our lives, we are faced with a similar problem. Accepting the healing and salvation of Christ makes logical sense from the point of view of faith. But our human instincts drive us in a different direction. Just as the man in the story seems to have no will of his own and is driven by the demons within him, we often resist change and run away to the familiar, living a life that makes no sense from the perspective of faith. Only when the man falls before Jesus does he find hope.

We find peace and transformation at the feet of our Savior, not in a life driven by the demons that possess us.

Some of the healing stories and exorcism stories end abruptly. In some Jesus says, “Your faith has made you whole.” In this story, Jesus gives the man an assignment. The once-possessed man is told to become an evangelist. He is, in fact, the first Gentile evangelist in Luke’s gospel. With this story Luke anticipates the Gentile mission that will be more fully developed in his second volume – Acts. Jesus instructs the man to go back home to the people “Who turned you out.” Go back home to those from whom your illness has separated you. Go home and witness to what God has done for you. Go home to tell your story.”

After all these years, Jesus’ instruction has not changed. All we are told to do is tell our story. And telling our story will be enough.

Some of us are privileged to be with people in their suffering. Some of us have witnessed the power of faith in those saints who have suffered more than most of us could stand. Perhaps we have all met the person who has come through suffering. Perhaps the demons have left them. They may be scared. They may be wounded, but now they share the good news of their story.

This week I have been remembering three sainted women who refused to be victims. I believe that victimhood has become a cause for celebrity in our culture and I find that extremely distasteful. The Christian faith does not celebrate victimization. Through the grace of God, Christ stands with us through our pain, injustice, difficulty and suffering. In a culture that avoids pain at all costs, where any sort of suffering or difficulty is regarded as unjust, Jesus still calls us to follow him especially in our times of pain. One of the women I am remembering was a member of my home church. I do not know why she was in a wheelchair, but in my memory, she had always been. Her mobility may have been limited, but she was not slowed. My pastor laughed with her about chipping the paint off of her door frames when she cut the corners too close as she raced around her home. That saint wanted to do something for others. With her limited mobility she chose to make patchwork quilts. I was honored one day to receive one of her quilts.

Bessie Merrill was retired when I was a very young boy. She carried on a voluminous correspondence with her former students flung around the world. Of course, this was back in the day when we corresponded by writing letters on paper and mailing them with stamps. Bessie developed Parkinson’s and her handwriting slowly deteriorated and finally became illegible. At 80-something years old, Bessie taught herself to type, in order to keep up with her correspondence.

At the end of her life, the third of these three saints were confined to her bed, primarily because of bone pain from her metastatic cancer. One of the last times I visited her she softly wept because she was no longer able to do anything for others. Her life, since being a little girl, had been all about others.

We need to remember this demon possessed man when we are strategizing about evangelism and how to grow the church. People are not hungry for some amazing demonstration of the power of God. What people need is to hear the testimony of one who has been healed and restored. The once-possessed man goes home to live among his people. He is a constant reminder of the renewed body, mind and spirit that is a gift from God. Following Jesus may mean staying where we are and bearing witness to the mighty acts of God that we have experienced in our lives. Perhaps this is one way God builds up the community of faith: through the testimony of the wounded healer.