



Grace in Lost Identity

Luke 8:26-39

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Welcome to the season of Lent. This season of the year, through a 40-day journey of preparation for Easter, calls us to acknowledge the great work of God in the world, and to repent for those times we have tried to replace the power of God in our lives with earthly substitutes. To help us with the call to recognize the magnitude of God, we will be looking at stories throughout the Biblical text where God's love and power are made manifest, even at times when God's presence was unexpected.

We begin this week with the story of the Gerasene Demoniac. The story is found in each of the synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The narrative tells us of a man who had been overcome with demonic forces, named by Luke as demons and unclean spirits. Let's unpack the setting of the story a bit.

Luke tells us that Jesus had arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, and it describes it as being opposite of Galilee. If you can visually picture the land of Israel, the country runs north to south, being lengthy, but not very wide. The Mediterranean Sea runs along the western coast. Down the eastern border of Israel and the West Bank runs the Jordan River, stretching from the Sea of Galilee in the north down to the Dead Sea, located just southeast of Jerusalem. The country continues to extend south of the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba. In our Modern day, to the east of Israel are the countries of Syria, running opposite of the Sea of Galilee up north, and then Jordan spanning the rest of the eastern border.

Up to this point in scripture, we know that Jesus had been teaching almost exclusively in the region of Galilee. What is meant by that is that Jesus had been teaching in the Jewish region around Galilee. The Jewish region was the side of Galilee facing Israel, the region to the west of the sea, in and around cities like Tiberius, Capernaum, and Magdala.

The scripture tells us here that Jesus had gone to Gerasa, which is opposite of Galilee. What this means is that Jesus is leaving the Jewish region to the west of the sea and is travelling to the opposite side of the sea, going to the eastern coast, which was a region that was predominately Gentile – meaning, there were very few Jews living there. Gerasa was a city located to the Southeast of the Sea of Galilee, a city that today is remembered only by its architectural remains and aged city gates.

Travelling outside the region of Jewish territory, Jesus has entered into a foreign land. To the Jews, the region was considered an unclean space, a place Jews tended not to travel. This is perhaps best signaled by the herd of pigs that runs free on the hillside. We know that swine are considered non-kosher to the Jews; the free reign of the pigs on the countryside alone signals

an unclean land. Jesus being in a foreign land is also signaled by the lack of his recognition by the people he encountered. As Jesus travelled in Galilee, he was met with crowds of people who wanted to be near him and hear him speak for they had heard of his miracles of healing and his Biblical teaching. This is most obvious in scenes like the Sermon on the Mount and in the feeding of the multitudes, as we see a host of Jews who had gathered around Jesus.

But that was not what Jesus encountered in Gerasa. When the people of the town found Jesus, they feared him and asked him to leave. Not quite the welcome Jesus had received when teaching in Galilee. What was their aversion to Christ? Why were they so scared of him? To answer these questions, we have to meet the man possessed with demons.

There was a man who lived in Gerasa, the land of the Gerasenes. It came to be that he was overcome with demonic and evil spirits. His ability to function as a part of society became impossible. He was no longer welcomed by his family and friends. The people who lived around him feared him because he was overcome by these evil spirits.

For their own safety, the people of the city had tried to control the man with shackles and chains. They put guards to watch over him. But the spirits were too powerful for the people of the city to keep under control. The man had seizures more powerful than the people could manage to hold down. With the power of the spirits running his body, he would break any chains and shackles they managed to get around his hands and feet. Eventually the demonic forces drove the man into the wild, away from the city people, outside the city walls. He was no longer recognizable to the people of the city. His identity as brother, friend, neighbor, son, homeowner, patron, father, or even human was lost. Taken over and no longer in control, the demons who possessed him took up home in the tombs in the country side outside the city walls. The tombs were a ghastly and unclean area where the dead were buried. The man had nothing left from his former life that was recognizable. Even his name was lost, the demons answering for him when asked, claiming the name of *Legion*.

It is in this situation that Jesus comes into contact with the man.

Jesus comes to what was considered an unclean territory and he meets a man possessed by unclean spirits who lived in an unclean place. "This is, in short, the very last place Jesus should be. Which, when you think about it, is where God usually shows up."ⁱ

Jesus gets off the boat and meets the man, encounters the man whose identity was lost to the people in his home city. In a land where no one would have known Jesus, it is interesting that the evil spirit knew Jesus. In fact, not only did the spirit know him, the spirit feared him. Jesus cast the demons out, sending Legion into the herd of swine, who then plunged themselves into the lake. Admittedly, it's a strange chain of events. The swineherds – that is, the shepherds of the swine – ran in to town to announce what they had seen happen.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, at the news of the events, we're told that people from the town came out to see for themselves what had happened. That tends to be what we people do, isn't it? We

hear of a large commotion taking place in the neighborhood, and we venture out to see what's going on. Be it a fire engine, a police car, flashing lights, shouting, or perhaps a post on our Facebook feed that announces something is awry, we tend to venture out when strange events are said to be taking place in the neighborhood.

People came to the place Jesus was, and they found this man sitting before Jesus. I imagine it took them a minute to recognize the man. They expected to see this dirty, smelly, unclean man with tattered clothing – that's what he looked like when they had cast him out from the town for his unruly and uncontrollable behavior – they instead found this man clothed and in his right mind sitting before this foreigner – this Jewish rabbi. They see the odd and unexplainable sight of these two men, and then they look to the lake down the hillside. There, they see a large pool of dead swine floating in the lake.

Luke tells us that they were sore afraid. Have you heard that phrase before? Those who have come out to see the events of the day encounter the same fear that the shepherds had when the angels appeared in the heavens overhead on the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem. They were overcome by fear at the unexpected heavenly power in front of which they found themselves standing.

Awestruck perhaps, silenced for sure, they were unsure of what had taken place. But their response is unmistakable. Luke tells us in verse 37, all the people of the surrounding country asked Jesus to leave.

More to help myself than anything else, let's recap ... Jesus has come to a foreign land, a region considered unclean by the religious leaders in his own faith, and has healed an unclean man who had been outcast from his own community, a man who was overcome by unclean spirits, who had been living in an unclean location, at least according to cultural customs. The people of this foreign land come and see what has happened, they find the unclean man clean in every way, and they are so terrified of the power that Jesus has exhibited, that they tell him to leave.

Why do they tell him to leave?

Perhaps they tell him to leave because he's destroyed an entire herd of pigs. This would have been no small problem for the local community. The pigs represented a central source of income and food for the Gentile community. So, we must first acknowledge that Jesus' sending the spirits into the swine, and the demise of the swine, is a pretty big fiscal concern for the Gerasenes. Truly, Jesus' presence in any society is going to have financial implications, and not always implications that the locals appreciate. It's worth naming that Jesus' presence was seen unfavorable toward the local economy. "The gospel [most certainly] does stir the economy, because healings, conversions, and the embrace of Christian ethics radically influences getting and spending."ⁱⁱ

You may have heard that in many Latin American nations, clergy are some of the most disliked members of society. Pastors openly speak out against the drug and sex trade, and have been in

multiple Latin American countries targeted with death threats and assassination attempts. It seems the Gospel message the Pastors are speaking so publicly, which calls for purity of action and thought, doesn't help the financial life of those running the local cartels and gangs.

But perhaps more than the financial implications for the community, Jesus' presence presents another problem. Jesus appears to have powers that are quite lofty and unknown. Jesus has not only shown he can control this man, something the city was unable to do with shackles and chains, Jesus has shown he has the power to even cast out the demons who had possessed this man. "Even when it is for good, power that cannot be calculated nor managed is frightening."ⁱⁱⁱ

Do we find it surprising when the powers that be in our nation show great concern when the unified voice of the faithful speaks out against them? Do we find it unanticipated when those who wield power in our local, state, and national governments seek to silence the rising voice of those who claim the great love of God in Christ?

It should leave us in anything *but* disbelief when those who claim earthly powers seek to ignore, to cast out, to run away from, or to silence the voice of the faithful from speaking the truth of God's great love. For the power of God is far greater than any such power claimed by humanity, and such power by God cannot be manipulated.

But let's not push all the blame to elected officials. Have you ever noticed what happens here in our society when we dislike the voice of another? Have you ever named out loud the events that take place when someone disagrees with the lifestyle or behaviors of another? I'm talking about you and me – I'm talking about our friends, our family, and our neighborhoods. When we dislike what's going on in the life of another, or how the decisions and lifestyles of another seem to rub against our own thoughts, we seek to outcast them.

This past year, I even had someone in my neighborhood inquire about a car that seemed out of place in our neighborhood - a car that seemingly was the home for a man and woman. They didn't like the car hanging out in our neighborhood because they didn't like the thought of what it meant to have this car being present in our neighborhood. They were, among other things, worried such a presence would affect the prestige of our housing. They felt it could negatively affect the safety and the housing market of our homes. Turns out, they couple was just looking for a safe place to sleep.

And that's what we do we dislike others, we find ways to outcast them – like the man in the tomb, and like Jesus, the unexpected foreigner. What if we redefine, using the Gerasene Demoniac as our example, those things we call demons in the lives of others ... those things we believe keep other people from being 'clean'? We can just pull from the stream of consciousness really quick using recent media headlines ... a few things that are used to define others as unclean could be: mental illness, paranoia, addictions, obsessions, destructive habits, radicalized faith, people from other nations, immigrants, Muslims, Tea Partiers, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives, and Politicians ... the list goes on. We use 'othering' to justify kicking people out, especially if they seem to wield power that we cannot control.

But in this Biblical witness, the example of the right and faithful practice is not exhibited by the people of Gerasa. The teaching that God is lifting up as praiseworthy doesn't come from the people who cast out the Demoniac or Jesus. The teaching that God is calling to our attention is that of Jesus. Jesus is the one who exemplifies the love of God, who gives us the example of the good news that is to be proclaimed in your life and in the lives of all in the world around us. Jesus is the one who sets for us a teaching example that calls us to faithful discipleship.

And what did Jesus do? Jesus went out of his way – left his home territory, his family, friends, and faith community – to travel to a region that was considered unclean. And he did this to positively impact the life of a man who lived in an unclean space, who himself was considered unclean because of the demons in his life. “All of which suggests to me that there is absolutely nowhere God is not willing to go to reach and free and sustain and heal those who are broken and despairing.”^{iv}

I want you to hear this story of God's replicated grace. If you have been outcast from family, friends, and community because of what's going on in your life, or if you've run away from family, friends, and community because of the demons you have in your life, I want you to know God is pursuing you as sure as Christ sought that man living in the tombs. God offers you the healing you need that you may be renewed with vigor for life to share the love of God in the world.

And if you are someone who identifies more with the Gerasenes at large than with the outcast man, I want you to know God is pursuing you too. God offers to you in Christ the very love that you may be withholding from someone else. It's hard sometimes to accept the great love of God, for it is more powerful than we know how to manipulate. But as sure as that man ran back into town to tell of the work of Christ in his life, so too does God seek for you to encounter the love that knows no bounds, that you may be a life changing impact that teaches another about the great grace of God that can free each of us from our captivity. For the glory of God, we give thanks for the great grace of God. Amen.

ⁱ David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved March 2, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock.

^{iv} David Lose.