

What Have You to Do with Me?

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Scripture: Mark 5:1-20

Just last week I stood on the Big Island of Hawaii. Surrounded by black lava at every turn, standing in front of a steaming caldera, watching waves crash into the shore, we were constantly reminded of the youth of the island and the forces under and over the earth pushing land upward, breaking lava and coral into sand and intrepid roots of young plants creating soil. Sure, there was human influence all around as well...a road right through a lava field, hotels at the shoreline, and walls built to create a salt water pool. Yet the lava boulders suggest how quickly all could burn away, how small our human efforts are against the forces that create the land we stand upon. ...forces that are often hidden from our eyes...you know they still have no way of predicting when/where an earthquake will happen... forces that are untamed.

It feels so different standing here, leaves swept away before you arrive; umbrellas blocking the sun's direct contact. The ocean stays where it is supposed to and earthquakes are weak in comparison to those a few hours away. It is easier to believe in this environment that given a battle between nature and humankind, humans win. Nature, even our human nature, can be tamed if we just work hard enough.

In the midst of our efforts to tame the untamable, reality hits. We aren't the healers we most want to be. We can't leave behind our past hurts and get over it any more than we can touch someone out of disease by our own power. There is no magic in our hands. We cannot defeat demons alone. Within us, and within those we love, untamed forces boil. To say we can control these forces is like trying to plug up a volcano so we might tap its energy, or trying to tame a demon so we might use it for our own purpose.

Demons are abundant in Mark's gospel. The rumblings of the underground movement of the spiritual world are seen bubbling up. Mark's world is a place of spiritual battle where humans are possessed and paralyzed and blind and deaf. The body is the spiritual

battle ground. The body is the spiritual battle ground.

The Gerasene Demoniac is one of the dirtiest, if not the dirtiest, characters in the Bible. He lives among graves. He howls. He bruises himself with stones. He cannot be restrained. "No one" scripture says "had the strength to subdue him." He was filled with power enough to wrench any chains apart. It is this unruly mess of a man, more animal than human, who pops out at Jesus from behind a tomb when Jesus first walks in Gentile, non Jewish, territory.

In many ways this plays into Jewish expectation, a Gentile was not clean. They were apart from God's chosen people. (For an interesting comparison see Mark 7: 24-30). Yet, in the kingdom of God, that which Jesus ushers in, they are not left to wander among the dead. Instead, in a great irony, the possessed Gentile runs towards Jesus and bows before him.

This untamable force that has taken hold of the man, a force called Legion, falls down at Jesus' feet. A legion (from the NIB commentary) may refer to the group with the same name of Roman fighters--6000 infantry, 120 cavalry, and other assorted auxiliary forces. In the Roman Empire, the legions kept the peace.

Nothing in Mark's gospel is there just because... in three years Jesus healed, exorcised many and we know there are many stories of Jesus included in Luke and Matthew and John that are not included in Mark. The simplest to point to is where Luke and Matthew tell of the miraculous birth of Jesus while Mark skips over that completely. So we always have to ask, why include this one...why tell of the legion?

One possible reason is that for an occupied people, the Roman legions were the volcanic force destroying what was most important to them. On one level, the political-social struggle is symbolically embodied and won. "No one had the strength to subdue him." But here, the Legion bows before Jesus. This force that could not be chained begs to be left alone. So is foreshadowed the promise that another kind of peace, another empire, another kingdom is being ushered in. In this new world, not the soldiers, not the legions, not the

emperor, but Jesus has the power.

The story told before Jesus crosses the Sea is of the storm. The disciples cry out in desperation wondering if Jesus cares at all about what is happening to them...and Jesus stands in the boat and says "be still" and the wind and the rain cease.

Not our hands, not our will, not the legions, not the emperor, not the wind, not the rain but Jesus has the power....power not only to save us from the storm but power to oust that which seeks to take away the hope of the faithful...and power to make us clean.

Demons have every incentive to keep us from Jesus. They distract us out of the silence of prayer. Demons are the creatures that give voice to our nightmares. They gladly tell us how dirty we are, speaking in memories from the past. They are the voices of doubt deterring future leaps of faith. They are the chanting voices of our culture...it is up to you. It is up to you. They are the comparisons...why aren't you like? Why don't you do what she did? Why don't you have enough people buying your item, or coming to your church, or wanting to be part of your company? They are the shoulds...I should have been there, I should have said this, I should have done better.... They frighten...

My 7 year old daughter is in the second grade. When I suggest something even slightly different from the teacher, she says to me with tears in her eyes, "the teacher won't like it. The teacher will get angry with me." The voice that comes out of her at times like this...well it isn't the confident girl I know.

Never mind that she has the sweetest second grade teacher ever.

Henri Nouwen writes in *The Way of the Heart* that our society is not a community radiant with love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul.

Demons are everywhere. We are an unclean people. Our lives are spent not in the temple but in Geneseret...in the land of the unclean.

Our dirty selves jump out every time we pray...demons seek to put us back into hiding, hiding from Jesus.

One example, when I pray, it is an easy trap that I fall into to come to Jesus seeking a solution for a problem. I spend nights awake trying to ask him what I should do, mulling over one thing or another. I never quite get to Jesus at these times. Instead, I'm often flooded with guilt for what has not been done that day,

a litany of missed opportunities. No wonder prayer has too often seemed like a chore!

When I'm not doing this at 3 in the morning, but am, instead, still enough, willing to confess what I've not done and hand it over, then I draw near to Jesus. There he reminds me over and over that prayer time isn't to always be problem solving time. It is enough to simply be with the one who makes me smile, who brings me joy, who makes me laugh, and reminds me that, given Good Friday, Jesus might not have been seen as having done everything very well in his day.

And for a while, the unclean spirit that wants keep me from Jesus, goes elsewhere.

That's my struggle...For another it might be a worry about being lost or left behind...for another it might be fear that they don't have enough and can't provide...and for another the fear they will never find love...

The number of demons, the number of spirits that seek to make us unclean, less than that which we were created to be, is indeed legion.

It is their desire to keep us from Jesus. I am reminded of part of the prayer a father says for his household every day...if there are any unclean spirits in our home, in us, by the name of Jesus Christ, leave...go to Jesus. We might even name those spirits...if there is a spirit of anger or a spirit of frustration...if there is a spirit of despair or a spirit of defeat...a spirit of compulsion to please, a spirit of worry...go to Jesus. Lord, fill us instead with your Holy Spirit full of grace and truth.

I'm going to stop a moment and ask you...there are pencils and envelopes in the pews...for those of you who think best when writing...what demon keeps you from Jesus, what unclean spirit infects you in the morning filling you with that which is not of God...write it or name it...

So maybe the demons led the man to Jesus, hoping to have their way with him. I think it is possible that, like you have just done, that there was something deep inside him that knew Jesus wanted him to be well so he came to Jesus and gave him the name. His bowed down in worship, his silent plea.

If you ever have a chance to watch the *Bad News Bears* again...do so and towards the end of the movie, notice the silence. It is in the silence that the coach played by Walter Matthau has his transformation...from winning the championship game at any cost (the unclean spirit of greed), to allowing the children to

make their own way, even if it means losing (the spirit of love). There's no music, there's no background noise of any kind, just silence...the silence of a man who sees his worst self through the dejected eyes of those looking back on him...and he turns away.

How different it is from the shouting and the swearing that came before...his yelling at his own daughter that he doesn't want to be her father...his screaming that he can't be what he isn't...

What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me."

Demons do not go away without a fight.

They know that if they can get us to fight back on our own strength, with our own words, with our own power, then we are lost. If we try to win, they win.

But where Jesus enters in, demons cannot stand. The mighty legion bows down to Jesus. It was the man who knew the source of his life who made them bow down...it was his will to be well...his will to come to Jesus...that brought them to the only place where the voices could no longer speak.