

Mark 5: 1-20 "Literature of the Oppressed" Rev. Janet Chapman 7/21/24

A story is told about a large family whose last name was Cummings that attended a local church. One Sunday, the preacher really let loose a scorching sermon on the dangers of sin. He talked about human failures, pride, greed, gluttony, sloth... all the shortcomings that befall the human race. That day after church, the youngest son moped around the house until his Mom asked what was wrong? He said, "The preacher doesn't like me anymore." They asked why he would think that? He responded, "Well, he kept talking about how bad our short Cummings were, and since I'm the shortest Cummings, I guess he doesn't like me anymore."

Names have great power in our society, just as they did back in Jesus' day. Today's Gospel story begins with a unnamed, naked man in Gentile territory, haunting the places of the dead. According to Jewish custom, he is not only perilous to himself and others, he is religiously unclean. Jesus meets an unclean man in unclean tombs in an unclean country. It is the very last place Jesus should be; which when you think about it, is exactly where God shows up. We are told from the very beginning this will be a story about God meeting us in moments of profound doubt, grief, loss, defeat, and surprisingly, among those who have little interest in, let alone a relationship with, God. Jesus says to the demon possessed, "What is your name?" Note that the man didn't approach Jesus for help, but to scare him away; the demons want nothing to do with him and implore him to leave. But Jesus isn't easily frightened and thus asks a very loving, searching question, "What is your name?" By doing so, he begins to call the broken man back to himself, to his humanity, to his beginnings, to his unique and precious identity as a beloved child of God's. "What is your name?" Debie Thomas turns to us and asks, "What would happen if you allowed Christ to ask the same of you, or you asked it of others? Who are you? Who are you really? Beneath the labels and the diagnoses, the pretense and the piety, the fear and the shame? Who are you when no one is looking? What name do you yearn to be called by in the lonely stretches of the night? Who were you before you lost yourself? Before something vital in you died? Do you even remember?" Jesus begins where we must begin - with an honest questioning and naming of ourselves.

The man responds, “Legion – I am legion.” He has defined himself by his deficits, by his ailment, by his struggles and captivity, by his shortcomings. The word comes from the Roman army meaning around 5000 soldiers, a multitude, an incalculable swarm. In other words, many demons torment him; the sources of his brokenness are vast. The assault on his mind, soul, and body is multi-pronged and it strips him of his dignity, his sanity, and his community; it keeps him in isolation and renders him anonymous without a real name. It encourages him to mutilate his body, it deadens his soul, and divides his mind. In short, it deprives him of self-control, and propels him towards self-destruction. Maybe some of this sounds familiar to a few of you. The truth is, what ails us all as human beings is Legion. The evil that haunts us has many faces, many names. Every one of us is vulnerable to forces that seek to take us over, to bind our mouths, to take away our true names, and to separate us from God and one another. Some of us suffer from depression or anxiety, some of us are addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, wealth or beauty. Some of us experience the world at a deafening volume, in colors too vivid for our sensitive eyes. Some of us are slaves to the internet, or prone to bitterness, or caught up in cycles of dishonesty, or in lust with our own rightness or supremacy. Some of us can’t shake traumatic memories. Some of us were abused as children. Some of us are seething with envy or mistrust. Some of us experience our colors, our accents, our genders or our sexualities as magnets for other people’s hatred. Some of us suffer illnesses that criss-cross the boundaries of medicine and culture, nature and nurture while some of us understand the apostle Paul’s words to a tee: “What I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate to do, I do.” If we expand the definition of “possession” to include everything that conspires to keep us dead when God wants us alive, then today’s story is not an ancient one, it is in the air we breathe, it is the true pandemic of our time. For such a time, surrendering to Christ casts the demons aside.

This is one way to embrace this story as not just for the first century but for the 21st century, but there is another approach which takes into consideration its context. This story has been handed down to us over many generations and we do it a disservice if we try to take it as a literal, factual account of the event. For one, Mark and Luke say the story happen in Gerasa while Matthew says it happen in Gedara. In Matthew, it involves 2 demoniacs while

Mark and Luke only one. In Mark and Luke, Jesus arrives by boat when there is no sea nearby to Gerasa, being 30 miles inland, while Matthew tries to correct that detail by saying Jesus arrived by boat via Gedara, 25 miles closer to the seaside. But what if Luke and Mark intended the town of Gerasa to begin with? The historian Josephus indicates that the Roman army brutalized the people of Gerasa in AD 66 as a part of its campaign against the Jewish rebels of the first Jewish-Roman war? A legendary Roman legion of 5000 soldiers would have been overkill, but a smaller cohort may have been responsible for the historic massive genocide there. The people of Gerasa had been oppressed to near extinction, not unlike what is being done in Gaza. Could the story be a reflection of the forces of evil at work as well as a word of hope to the Gerasenes, Don't get me wrong – I'm not saying the story isn't true – it's far truer than we care to believe.

Finding its truth, however, takes a willingness to open our minds to what lies beneath and understanding the power of stories. Brian McLaren calls this a story of the oppressed, born out of the literature of the oppressed at work in the Bible. It is a part of a group of stories that have been passed through the enhancements and embellishments of God-fearing people to intensify the beauty, mystery, and awesomeness of the event, while protecting the story's legitimacy. Emily Dickinson clarifies such a process saying, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant" and Soren Kierkegaard calls it "indirect communication." Why do that? Because the truth, the literal truth, is too much to bear or too dangerous to speak, so storytellers speak in literary truth instead. Consider how the enslaved people in the American South couldn't say, "Black and white people are equal, slavery is evil and must be eradicated," or they would be whipped, tortured, even killed. A gifted young woman in a strict patriarchal culture can't say, "I'm fully equal to a man," or she will be banished from her family. Even today, political candidates can't say, "I think contemporary capitalism is destroying the environment" or they will lose the election. Just like a young English major at a fundamentalist church reading the book of Revelation, the book of Daniel, and stories like today's can't say, "I think there may be some legendary embellishment and literature of the oppressed at work in the Bible," lest he be excommunicated from the church. The stories of Jesus' actions, his miraculous compassion and inclusion, need to be shared but history has shown us that sometimes the powers that be

will not hear of it. They will go so far as to kill storytellers and messengers before they will let the gospel be preached. Thus, the oppressed people end up submitting to their oppressors' threats and they never find their voice of truth. Something inside of them dies. Their submissive silence means compliance, rendering them co-conspirators in their own diminishment, their own demise, while the oppressors' power goes unchallenged. God knows these things thus we are given parables, Jesus' favorite instrument of teaching, and we are given stories of liberation and healing in order that the oppressors don't get the last word. When the literal truth is too extreme for the hard-hearted to hear, the truth is spoken in the only way it can be, so that storytellers can maintain their voice and their dignity.

A human burdened with a myriad of ailments comes to Jesus. Being healed is an unknown which frightens him because he has no experience in such things. His community has experienced untold religious violence and oppression. He has lost his identity, his voice has been silenced. The pork-loving oppressors try to speak through him, but Jesus will not let the swine have the last word. They are cast out and the community is in shock. Who is this that can single-handedly take on an army of oppression? Does this mean more violence will follow? Is this the heart of the story? The truth is I can't tell you because this just could be a parable, and parables are like onions complete with many layers, that get peeled back again and again to reveal something new. Ultimately, it's all in the hands and the mind of the greatest Storyteller to ever walk this earth. Our call is to keep telling the stories in ways that deepen, expand, and intensify their meaning, not to mislead or deceive, but so that others can experience the transformation the Storyteller provides in healing and reconciliation, in liberation, and a great joy for all creation.