

Being Human

Mark 5:1-20

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William Stringfellow was an extraordinary lay theologian who died in 1985 at age 56. He was a Harvard trained lawyer who spent several years practicing in Harlem in the 1950's where he learned first-hand of the predatory principalities and powers dehumanizing and destroying human beings. Earlier Stringfellow had spent a year in Germany not long after WWII doing relief work. He had numerous conversations with people who had resisted the Nazis. He kept asking, "What did you do?"

Stringfellow learned that by the time Nazism was in total control with its "efficiency and power and violence and vindictiveness" in a reign of Death and every decent person was in despair, a few "persevered in their audacious, extemporaneous, fragile, puny, foolish resistance."

So Stringfellow kept asking them, asking himself, and asking us, "How and what did you do?" He came to the conclusion, "I believe, that the act of resistance to the power of Death incarnate in Nazism was the only, means of retaining sanity and conscience. In the circumstances of the Nazi tyranny, *resistance became the only human way to live*... It consisted day after day of small efforts... hard and hapless, and apparently hopeless tasks... But it was the only stance worthy of a human being" (Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, pp.118-119).

So my question this morning: What does it mean to be human?

As in all things, we Christians are called to start with Jesus. He shows us what it means to be human. Indeed, the term that Jesus exclusively uses in referring to himself is “the son of man,” which is an ancient Jewish way of saying, “I’m a human being.” The term is better translated as “the truly human one,” and it is used over 30 times in Matthew, 15 times in Mark, 25 times in Luke, and 12 times in John. We are likely more accustomed to refer to Jesus as the Son of God, but the New Testament and Jesus prefers “the Truly Human One.”

Christian teaching for over 2000 years is that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, which is known as the doctrine of hypostatic union. If we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus. If we want to know what being human is like, we also look to Jesus.

So this morning, let’s look at Jesus in Mark 5 and his dealing with a human person who has been dehumanized, made less than human, isolated and alienated and living in the place of Death, a cemetery. This crazy guy, possessed and torn asunder inside, isolated from community, has bloody wounds all over from cutting himself, what clothes he has are ragged and torn and filthy, his wrists and legs are bruised and cut from chains and ropes that have been used to try to restrain him but from which he has always managed to break.

Jesus comes up in a boat, gets out and this madman, this man possessed and torn this way and that physically, mentally, and spiritually, comes running up and bows to Jesus in worship. But he also starts shouting, “Jesus, Son of the Most High God, what are you going to do? Don’t start messing with me! I’m crazy and I’m

possessed but it's what I know! I hold onto it and it holds onto me. Don't take anything away from me! Leave me alone!"

Jesus asks him his name. He replies, "My name is Legion." And then interestingly he switches to the plural pronoun, "we." "For we are many." And he begs Jesus if you're going to cast *us* out, "Send *us* into that herd of pigs over there on the hillside." Which is what Jesus did. And the unclean spirits enter into the pigs – all 2,000 of them – which causes them to run out of control over the cliff, and into the sea where they all drowned.

By this time, people from town are running up to see what all of the commotion was about and they discover the crazy, possessed man sitting there calmly, all dressed in clean and neat clothing and in his right mind.

The rest of the story is that the pig owners come up mad. Jesus is disrupting their business and he has to go or else. Clarence Jordan comments on this story and wonders what a herd of 2,000 pigs was doing on the far shore of the Sea of Galilee with the land of Jews nearby. Clarence surmises that these pigs were bootleg pigs and the owners were smuggling illegal pork into Judea and Galilee. Clarence also wonders if this possessed man could have been the son in the parable of the prodigal son, whom Jesus said was in "a far country" working with pigs. Here in this story it says the man was "sitting there in his right mind," and in the parable Jesus says, the son "came to himself." Clarence also wonders if this man had sunk so low that he was working for the bootleg pig operation. As a Jew he is working for a pork cartel operation that further alienated him from God and from his people. When Jesus sent the spirits of alienation and dehumanization into the pigs

and the pigs ran over the cliff, it destroyed what held the man in chains, what enslaved him.

I don't know. Interesting to think about.

Jesus gets up to leave, and the man implores Jesus to let him come with him but Jesus says, "No. Go home. Go back to your family and community and tell them what God has done for you and tell them of the mercy God has shown." The story concludes with the man doing that very thing "and everyone was amazed."

Jesus takes this divided, alienated, and torn man, torn inside and torn outside, disconnected from himself, disconnected from his community, and disconnected from God and makes him a whole person. He becomes what he was intended to be: a real human being.

It is interesting to me that the standard theological way of thinking of such things these days is that the Christian way of dealing with issues is considered "idealistic." We say, after the teaching of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, that we need to live in the "real" world. We say that the Christian teaching on love and mercy and grace is fine and good but it's too idealistic. Since we live in a world of sin and brute power, we need to get "real."

What's real in this story is this man after encountering Jesus. Theologian Karl Barth, counter to Niebuhr, has said that God is real and everything associated with God is real. Sin and evil, brute power and the power of Death is what is unreal. Love and mercy and grace are real. In Christ we become real, more human; we become whom God has intended for us to be.

For many of us, especially white males like me, it is easy to feel threatened when dealing with our racism and White Privilege. We feel as if we are losing something, we're afraid of losing benefits, of losing our world, of losing what we're comfortable with.

But notice in this story, when Jesus comes and heals this man, he takes away what is driving him crazy, removes what has torn him inside and out, and in so doing restores him to full humanity. Jesus makes him more human not less. The demons that controlled the man were not a benefit to him, even though he was comfortable with them. They were a deprivation. They diminished him; they dehumanized him.

Sin and the Power of Death is anything that dehumanizes and diminishes others, God's creation, and us. To name it, confess it, and repent of it is not something that deprives us but something that enhances us and makes us more human, more real.

At the end of the story Jesus sends the man back to his community to tell this story. This restored and renewed human being is on the front end of the journey to becoming fully human, one who shares his story with others and helps create relationships and community with that story.

It is important; indeed it is essential for us to remember that this journey to wholeness and becoming fully human is both an inward journey and an outward journey.

The inward journey is the life of worship and prayer. It is the life of singing and the arts like gardening, quilting, sculpting, and dancing.

Bryan Stevenson is a African-American lawyer in Alabama and the founder and director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a law practice dedicated to defending the poor, the wrongly condemned, and those trapped in the further reaches of the criminal justice system. In his outstanding book, *Just Mercy*, he tells of meeting an older black woman at a courthouse. He had seen her in court several times and figured she was related to someone. But she kept coming to court no matter who was there. One day they met and she told him that she had lost her 16 yr. old grandson some years ago to murder. Other boys had killed him and were sent away forever to prison. She said that she cried and cried every day and even cried every day after the trial. Eventually, she said, she prayed and the Lord sent her back to the courthouse because other people, families of the victims and families of the victimizers, needed someone to lean on. That's why she came to court – so broken and hurting people could lean on her.

He asked her how she was able to keep on. It was hard. It was full of hurt. She said, “Ain't no way to do what I do and not learn how to appreciate a good sorrow song... I've been singing sad songs my whole life. Had to. When hurt people lean on you, even happy songs make you sad.” Then she added, “Bryan, you keep singing. Your songs will make you strong. They might even make you happy” (Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, pp. 306-310).

That older woman knew about the inward journey. She knew how to pray and she knew how to sing. If you're going to be fully human, you had better learn to sing.

But the inward journey must also have the outward journey. Without the outward journey, the inward becomes glorified naval-gazing or becomes a way of reinforcing our own self-centered ways, and reinforcing our own blindness.

To be fully human means that we journey outward, as well. The outward journey calls us to get out there where hurting and broken people need someone to lean on. The outward puts beside people who are not like us, where we listen to others and learn. The outward is where we embody and practice the humanizing ministry of Jesus. We are helping humanize others while they are helping humanize us.

Yet without the inward journey, the outward becomes so hard that we become cynical and burned-out, and we end up mirroring all that dehumanizes and diminishes. We become just like that which we oppose and resist.

The journey toward becoming fully human requires both the inward journey and the outward journey.

Thomas Merton, the great Catholic writer, monk, and person of prayer, said, “We are bodies of broken bones.” In other words, we are all broken and hurting. Bryan Stevenson said, “Sometimes we are fractured by the choices we make and other times we’re shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our shared humanity... We have a choice. We can embrace our humanness, which means our broken natures and the compassion remains our best hope for healing. Or we can deny our brokenness... and, as a result, deny our own humanity” (Stevenson, p. 289).

Stevenson goes on, “So many of us have become afraid and angry. We’ve become so fearful and vengeful that we’ve thrown away children, discarded the disabled, and sanctioned the imprisonment of the sick and the weak – not because they are a threat to public safety or beyond rehabilitation but because we think it makes us seem tough, less broken... “But embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy. When you experience mercy, you learn things that are hard to learn otherwise... You begin to recognize the humanity that resides in each of us” (p. 290).

In John 20 the resurrected Jesus enters a locked room full of fearful and despairing disciples. To show them who he is – his identity. But also what he is about – his vocation, Jesus shows them his scars, the nail prints in his hands and feet and his side where the spear had been thrust.

The Truly Human One is who he is because of his scars, not in spite of them. And the teaching over these 2000 years is that Jesus, the Truly Human One, shares those scars not only with his disciples but also within the Godhead that we call the Trinity. What that means is that God has scars. God knows what it means to hurt and be broken. God knows what it means to be human. Furthermore, the testimony of the Bible is that it is by these very scars that we are healed, redeemed, and some day all creation will be made whole.

Remember at the end of our story this morning, Jesus tells man he has set free and healed, “Go home and tell them of the mercy God has shown you” (Mk. 5:19).



Wendell Berry says we all have “hidden wounds” that we seek to keep covered and not talk about. But the Truly Human One calls us, invites us to show mercy and share our wounds and scars and receive mercy.

This world is full of meanness and vengefulness, where people celebrate separating children from their parents and deporting them on buses and trains. Where hatred is called a virtue and bigotry gets you elected to office.

Resistance to all that is the only human way to live – small actions of love, little efforts of mercy every single day, out of our own brokenness. Church is where we are freed and where God calls us to be a real, Truly Human church full of real, Truly Human beings.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.