

Sermon Notes - August 23, 2020
“A Story of Healing and Restoration”
(Luke 8:26-33, 38-39)

Aren't we always amazed and encouraged and challenged when we hear somebody else's healing story - maybe it's the healing of a marriage; maybe it's physical illness that has been healed?

I want to share a true story this morning that happened in Concord when I lived and was working at a church there. There was a man who was a member of the Downtown Methodist Church in Concord. He had gone into a hospital with a certain condition and he had died in the Emergency Room. During that time, he had a life-after-death experience where he saw his spirit come up out of his body and he saw people working on him. He saw a bright light and he was filled with love and surrounded by beauty. He said that he saw familiar faces of people that he knew (family and friends) that had gone to heaven before him. He said, "I heard the voice of God say to me, 'Not yet - go back and share what you have experienced.'" He said, "But, Lord, I want to stay," and God said, "No, not yet." He said that he never saw God, just saw the bright light and heard the voice. I want to you know that he saw his spirit go back into his body, he woke up, and there were people still working on him. He said that he survived that experience and for almost a month, he didn't talk about that experience - not even to his wife. He finally told his wife and she said, "Honey, why don't you go and share with our Pastor what happened to you?" So he did, and the Pastor said, "Sir, if God told you to share your experience, maybe you should go and share. Why don't you begin with your adult Sunday School class?" So, one Sunday, in the Sunday School class, when the teacher was finished, the teacher asked, "Does anyone want to share anything or ask any questions?" The man said, "Yes, I would like to share with you an experience that I had" - and he told about his life-after-death experience. From there, he shared with his church. You know when word gets out about somebody having that experience in the neighborhood, everybody else wants to hear it too. Our church had members that knew members from his church, so we invited him to come share at our church - to come speak to the Adult S.S.

classes. He began to share his experience that there was life-after-death. He said, "I saw people that I knew. I heard the voice of God without a doubt. I want you to know that there is something after death." I want you to know that he died one year to the day after he had this experience. He went to sleep and woke up in the loving arms of the Master. He was an inspiration to people that there was a life-after-death.

Many of you have heard stories about people being healed from cancer, or their marriage healed, or they have been liberated and restored and healed from addiction and hang-ups and habits that are keeping them from being all that God created them to be. Those stories encourage us and challenge us, and give us the strength to go through it ourselves - to go through it with God's help and the help of our friends.

Our Gospel lesson today is a crazy story - a man is healed from demon possession. I want you to know, that in the Bible, oftentimes when it spoke of demon possession, most scholars seem to think they were talking about mental illness. Now we know that evil spirits exist, don't we? Think about people like Saddam Houssein, think about genocides in parts of Russia and Yougoslavia and Central Africa, think about Adoph Hitler and the Holocaust - evil exists in the world, doesn't it? But, there is also mental illness - at times people feel like demons are overtaking their mind. If you speak to alcoholics and drug addicts who have been healed and restored, they will often say, "My demon was drugs," or "my demon was alcohol." Sometimes they have such an oppressive power.

This man in our Gospel story was said to have been full of demons. His name was Legion, meaning "many." (Legion was a Roman term for a unit of soldiers - 3000 to 6000 soldiers.) These demons had control over his mind and his actions. He got so bad that the people in the town ridiculed him, isolated him, and sent him to the graveyards. They forced him to go out in community by himself. His clothes were tattered. He had a war against himself and a war with others. He would tear and cut at himself and bruise himself. Have you ever met teenagers that cut themselves and bruise themselves and pull their hair out and cut their skin? Sometimes they are dealing with issues where they need help - whether it be

counseling, medication, or prayer. Sometimes they are so stressed that they take it out on themselves and are at war with themselves. This man was at war with himself and the demons had taken control of him.

I heard a cute story about a little 3-year-old boy that had gone grocery shopping with his dad. He's in the cart, his dad is pushing the cart around, and every time his dad would go around an aisle, the little boy would knock some cans off. He was real rambunctious. Every time they would go by a display, he was knocking stuff off in the floor. One time, the dad went to pick something up off the shelf and the little boy got out of the cart and went running around the store. Dad was chasing after him saying, "Tommy, hang in there. It's almost over. We'll be home soon. Hang in there. Calm down, Tommy." An elderly woman in the store looked at him and said, "Sir, I would like to compliment you on your patience with your son." He said, "Ma'am, my son's name is Michael. I'm Tommy." Sometimes the battle we fight is with ourselves.

I heard a story about a lawyer who went to his pastor and was having all kinds of issues. He said, "Pastor, my wife has left me and wants a divorce. I am not getting along with my children. On top of that, my co-workers don't like me either. They tell me that I'm too controlling and manipulative and dictatorial. Even my in-laws don't like me. I finally decided that all my problems and troubles are me. The problem is, I don't like myself." Have you ever noticed that when we feel good about ourselves, we are more gracious and kind and generous and giving? But, when we don't feel good about ourselves, we are hostile and negative. It taints our attitude and our relationships.

This man was at war with himself, but he was also at war with others. People isolated him, put him aside, put him under physical restraints. I heard about a young boy who grew up in a wealthy neighborhood. He was a senior in High School - getting ready to graduate. In the affluent neighborhood where he lived, most of the parents gave their kids a new car for graduation. He just knew that he was going to get one for graduation! He and his dad had been looking around for cars and they had finally found the one that the boy liked. Dad agreed with him. This

boy just knew that on the night of graduation, that car would be sitting in the driveway when he got home from the graduation ceremony. Guess what? It wasn't sitting in the driveway - and when he went into the house, his dad gave him a gift-wrapped Bible. He opened it, looked at it, threw it on the floor, and walked out the door. He wanted nothing to do with his dad from that day on. He worked that summer and went off to college. For four years, he stayed away from home. He and his mother would meet for lunch or dinner, but he wanted nothing to do with his dad. He was so mad that his dad didn't give him that car he wanted. I want you to know that when he was 22-years-old, his father died. His mother called him home for the funeral and to make arrangements. He came home and began to go through some of his dad's stuff. He found the Bible that his dad gave him on graduation night, wiped the dust off, and opened it up. Guess what was inside? - a letter from his dad saying, "Congratulations on your graduation" and a cashier's check for the exact amount of the car they had picked. ***Sometimes we can be at war with ourselves and war with others.***

This man was at war with himself and war with others. He was also at war with God, because when we are at war with ourselves and others, it disconnects us from our relationship with God. This man needed healing and liberation and restoration back to his family and his community. Jesus gave him that.

I want you to see several things in this story: ***First, here was a demon who knew who Jesus was. The Gentiles didn't know him, but the demons did.*** "Lord, son of David, have mercy on me. What are you here for? Are you going to torture me like all these other people do?" ***And secondly, when Jesus healed the man, he told him to go back home and tell his friends and family what God had done for him.*** Do you remember how many times Jesus healed someone and said, "Don't tell anybody?" Before this Gospel story today, Jesus healed the daughter of a religious synagogue ruler. He healed the man's daughter, but at the end of the story, Jesus said, "Don't tell anybody what I've done." Jesus knew that if it happened with the Jews, the Pharisees were always trying to plot and kill him. Jesus didn't want his ministry averted. But, here was a

Gentile who was healed – and Jesus said, “Go and tell your friends and family what God has done for you.” Jesus knew that the Gentiles would not avert his mission for they did not have the background of the Jewish faith and the hope of a Messiah. So, this man went back home and proclaimed Jesus and his power to heal and to liberate.

Thirdly, I want you to notice something else – Jesus always values compassion and humanity over things and possessions. Did you notice in the story it would make us a little uncomfortable, wouldn't it? Jesus healed one man and a herd of pigs drowned. Somebody's economic loss was experienced that day and the pig keepers ran back to tell the pig owners in town that their pigs were gone. “This man went out to heal somebody and all of a sudden, the pigs ran down the hill and drowned.” The owners were skeptical and had to see for themselves – and sure as the world, all the pigs had drowned in the lake – what an economic loss! *We need to see that Jesus always values humanity over things – people over things. Compassion and humanity was important to Jesus – even if it makes us uncomfortable and disturbed.*

Fourthly, Jesus calls us out of our comfort zone, doesn't he? Here was Jesus and his disciples (mostly Jewish) going into Gentile territory. This man was a Gentile and demon possessed – who lived in the tombs, the graveyard. All of that made them unclean. Jesus risked going outside to touch those who were broken, lost, oppressed, addicted, or sick in any way. Jesus always reached out and went beyond the comfort zone. ***He also calls us to come out of our comfort zones – to the outcasts, the rejects, the downtrodden, the broken, the depressed, the unjust, and to help and to minister to them. Jesus calls us to show compassion and to do that with others.*** Many times, Jesus told people not to tell their stories of healing. But, Jesus told this man to go back home and tell his family and friends what he had experienced. Can you imagine what it would have been like for him? He's been naked. He's been shrieking in madness. He's been bruising and cutting himself. He has broken his chains even when they've guarded him. And he's going to go back and tell people, “Hey, I'm that guy that couldn't speak. I'm the one that you used to see in that cave over there.” Can you imagine?

Sometimes God calls us out of our comfort zone to share our stories of healing and wholeness. Jesus told this man to go back home and tell his family and friends that he had experienced God's grace and healing. I wonder how many times that Jesus calls us to go back and share our stories of grace and healing?

Fifthly, I want you to hear something else this morning. ***Jesus does not give us an escape from the world, but he gives us a commission to go back into the world and to share our stories of faith and healing.*** Have you ever noticed that your story of faith and healing, encourages and challenges and comforts and strengthens and helps other people? What more powerful witness do we have than living out the faith and sharing our stories about what God has done in our lives - a time of healing, a time of wholeness, a time of restoration, and liberation.

I can't help but think that months ago, there was a man in our church who shared about his story and his struggle. He told you how God helped him. There is something in AA that I hope you remember: "My name is so-and-so and I'm an alcoholic. I'm powerless over my addiction. Only a power greater than me, a Creator power - God as I understand him, can help restore my sanity." That man in our church told you how God had helped and continues to help him fight his addiction.

Jesus asked the demon, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion." Isn't it amazing that the demon knew who Jesus was - even when the Gentiles didn't? Sometimes we have to name our sin and ask Jesus to help us - and God will help us. Jesus is in the healing, the restoration, and the liberation business. It doesn't matter if it's physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. Jesus calls us outside of our comfort zone to go to those people who are broken and outcasts and lost - those that might not be comfortable with us because we don't look the same way or act the same way or speak the same language. But Jesus has called us to reach out and minister to them and always remember people are more important than things. God's compassion is what we're to be

characterized by too - his compassion and love and grace. He calls us outside our comfort zone and he calls us to minister to the outcasts.

Jesus also wanted to teach the disciples something in this story and I hope you picked up on that. In the earlier story of the storm, they said, "Who is this man?" They were fearful. "Who is this man who calms the winds and the rains?" And then Jesus gives them the example that he even controls the demons. He's still trying to teach them who he is. He is also trying to tell them, "Just as I have come to the world to heal and proclaim the good news, I'm sending you out to be my agents of healing and grace and to proclaim Jesus' salvation and healing." He wanted to remind them who they are and who he was and is. Today, he wants to remind us of that. ***I want you to know that the most powerful way that we live out our faith is living it in such a way and sharing our faith stories with one another so others can know Jesus Christ.***

What a crazy story of healing and grace and power! It is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels; I hope you will go back and read it. I want to challenge you today to be willing to reach out beyond your comfort zone - be willing to take God's compassion to those that you don't think deserve it - because God has given it to all of us. Always remember that God values people over things. Remember that God's ministry is inclusive of all people, not exclusive. You see, Jesus wanted those disciples to know that even though he was a Jewish Messiah and the disciples understood the Jewish faith, that he was also ministering to the Gentiles - the non-Jews and that includes us. Thank goodness the gospel is open to all of us. May God help us to be healed, liberated, restored to ourselves to God and to community, and may we take our stories of healing and faith to the world that we might make Jesus larger in life and his grace to be known to all. Amen.