

Mark 5: 1-20

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. ²And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; ⁴for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷and he shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.' ⁸For he had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' ⁹Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' ¹⁰He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹²and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.' ¹³So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.

¹⁴The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. ¹⁶Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. ¹⁸As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹But Jesus refused, and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.' ²⁰And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Commentary: In this story we encounter, once again, Jesus' authority over unclean spirits. The man in the story is someone who is harassed by many demons. They cause him to be destructive toward himself and others. He is isolated and alone, in chains. But then he encounters Jesus. His liberation is dramatic and powerful. But what is the response of the people to this liberation? While the man begs to stay with Jesus, the people of the area beg Jesus to leave. Are they afraid? Of what exactly? Is it the confronting power of Jesus, challenging them to engage their own demons, too threatening for them? Whatever the case may be, the man exorcised of his demons is never the same again. Even though he wants to join Jesus, Jesus gives him another mission: 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you.'

When I re-read this story in this season of Covid-19, fascinating insights emerge. Before Jesus comes onto the scene you have a man totally isolated and alone because people are afraid of him and he is afraid of himself. Jesus' healing is about re-integrating him into social life. He is healed and empowered to spread Jesus' message

of mercy and grace from a place of gratitude for what Jesus has done for him. The people of the area, however, are not isolated and alone, but they fear the change Jesus has come to bring, and so they reject him and push him away, closing in on themselves and isolating themselves from his healing mercy and grace.

In this time, as we are forced to isolate ourselves from others physically, we are also being challenged to rethink how we connect with the world around us spiritually. Is this, perhaps a time to withdraw so that we may re-engage with a commitment to connect with mercy and grace or else set it aside and let it go? We are being challenged to rethink how we socialize and engage our world. Jesus has come among us. He is our challenge. His mercy and grace ought to be our source of liberative healing as well as the foundation and motivation for social connection. It is time to reset and change.

Prayer: Lord God, often I can appear strong on the outside, but deep inside I know how much I am afraid. I am afraid for myself and I am afraid for those I love. I know that you call me to honest self-confrontation and change. I know that too often I have put off such a call. It can be too costly in ways I'm not prepared to go. But I don't want to coast along spiritually any more. I can't afford to. I want to use this time meaningfully and purposefully. I want to be exorcised of the demons that can keep me chained in negative ways of thinking and behaving. Help me... Amen.