

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
June 26, 2022

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Rev. John F. Koerner

Luke 8:26-39

The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with (Jesus), but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to you home, and declare how much God has done for you."

(Luke 8:38-39 N.R.S.V.)

Sent Home to Witness

I saw a Facebook post the other day that said, "I'd like to ask God why there is so much suffering and pain in world? Why doesn't he do something about it? I would like to ask him, but I'm afraid that he might ask me the same thing."

I thought that was the perfect set up for this sermon. Our salvation in Jesus Christ, our healing and deliverance if you will, comes with a call to discipleship, servant hood, and accountability. Salvation is free. But a life of faith after that, requires accountability to God.

Look with me at this story of a miraculous healing that is found in Luke 8. The story contains some things that are strange to our modern mind set. This man has a host of demons we are told, so many that he refers to himself as legion. The Roman legions had between five and six thousand men. So for him to say that he had a legion of demons in him, is to say that he had lots and lots of problems.

In those days the word demon was used to refer to invisible powers who instigate harmful, chaotic activity. Today we would say that the man had a mental illness like schizophrenia. But changing the name does not make the individual suffering any less subject to invisible powers that create harmful, chaotic activity. We have changed the name, not the effects.

In the story the demons know Jesus by name. Again that is a bit difficult for our modern mind set. But let's not get hung up on that. That was a culture norm in those days and it helped affirm that even the demons know of Jesus' power and were afraid of him. The name of the disease and what the demons say is not the important part of this passage.

The important part is the healing and the call to discipleship. So here was a man who had been utterly rejected by his community. They were afraid of him. They hated him. They treated him like a dangerous, wild animal instead of a person that was hurting. They tried to tie him up but he kept getting loose. So finally they drove him out of town and left him to haunt the cemetery beyond the town limits. One can imagine that this man called Legion had little love for the

people of his town.

So the people of the town come out to see Jesus and they found old Legion sitting at the feet of Jesus, cured, delivered, or saved. The term “sitting at Jesus’ feet” means he has become a disciple of Jesus.

So the townspeople rejoiced that this man who had suffered for so long was finally healed and they welcomed him warmly back into the fold. That’s what we might expect, but wait! That is not what it says at all. It says that the townspeople were frightened at the power Jesus has displayed and they demand that he go away.

The man who was called Legion, is clearly not wanted either. He begs Jesus to take him into the boat with the other disciples. Now if I had been in Jesus’ place, I can imagine myself saying, “Of course, you are welcome to come with us. You have suffered enough here. Come with me and I’ll make sure you are protected and comforted.”

Notice that this is not what Jesus says. He says, “Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.” That has to be one of the hardest assignments that any disciple ever received. Go back home, and tell the very people who have feared and hated you, reviled you and treated you most shamefully - go back and tell them about how wonderful God is. There are times when Jesus can be very comforting. But there are also times when Jesus can be very demanding.

When the prophet Jonah was told to go and preach to the hated Ninevites, he refused. He was afraid that these people he considered his bitter enemies would repent, turn to God and be saved. Jonah did end up going but only after spending three days and three nights in the belly of a giant fish.

We have to admire Old Legion here. Whatever he might have thought about the people of his hometown, he obeyed Jesus immediately. Luke records, “And so he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”

Have you ever thought about prayer being a two-way street? I’m not talking about bargaining with God as if God were a haggling merchant in some Middle Eastern Marketplace. I’m talking about relating to God as our boss. Yes, God loves us and always wants what is best for us. But God’s agenda is not the same as our agenda. Yes, I believe that God’s ways are the best way for any of us to live. But that doesn’t mean that God will refrain from asking us to do anything difficult, risky, or even dangerous.

I was reading a story about a certain pastor in this month’s issue of Pulpit Resources. The article didn’t give the pastor’s name so I am going to call him Pastor Bill. Pastor Bill bought a brand new chainsaw. On his very first day of using his saw, he somehow managed to allow his sleeve to get caught in the spinning chain. The saw threw him to the ground and chewed a six-inch gash in his arm all the way to the bone.

Part of the reason that this story caught my eye was because I was remembering my own experiences with a chainsaw. No, I didn't cut myself, thank God. But I did take my brand new day glow green chainsaw and cut an oak tree that fell on my neighbor's shed. Something that I might add was entirely preventable. I never felt more foolish and stupid in my life.

Anyway, Pastor Bill rushed to the ER. He relates how the nurse told him to hold the bandage tighter and stop dripping blood on her floor. But she was also the one who gave him a shot of morphine - what a relief that was.

Pastor Bill had to endure five hours of surgery and a long physical recovery. But he says that he has few lasting effects from his accident. He says that one of the things that people asked him afterwards was whether he spent more time in prayer as a result?

Bill says that he didn't really spend a lot of time praying for healing. He was kind of hoping that God would be too busy with problems in the Middle East to notice his stupidity. That's a small joke there.

Bill reflected that too much of today's praying is about asking God to fix our problems. Yes, Bill believes in the power of healing prayer. Jesus healed people of their sicknesses and told his disciples to do the same. James chapter 5 includes an instruction that the elders of the church should pray for the sick.

Pastor Bill's concern is that modern prayer has become overly focused on healing us from our various diseases. He is concerned that we have reduced the role of God in our lives to being merely another member of the health care team.

He points out that prayer in the Bible is far broader and more robust than this. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 5:43 that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. How much time do we spend praying for our enemies? In the garden before his arrest and crucifixion Jesus prayed that "let this cup be taken from me," but then he also taught us to pray, "Not my will, but thine be done." How much time do we spend praying that God would use us in his work? Are we brave enough and trusting enough to pray for God's will to be done?

Bill chose to use his prayer time after his accident as a way of opening himself up to what God was showing him. Right after his accident, Bill said that his arm was so torn up it looked like red soil. He saw in that a reminder of his mortality. We were created from the dust and to the dust we shall return. Our only hope of salvation is in Christ Jesus and in his intervention.

Bill was thankful for the skills of the medical personnel who tended to him. How blessed we are to live in a time when such help is available to us!

Bill was in a lot of pain after the accident. But the doctors assured him that the pain would pass. Bill gained a whole new appreciation of the people who must live with chronic pain that never goes away. And he noted that God is still able to use people with disabilities and pain.

The Apostle Paul, one of the great giants of prayer, once prayed that some affliction be taken from him so that he could better serve God. Paul called it his “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know what that affliction was. It could have been anything from blinding headaches to pain from old injuries incurred when he was being stoned by the mob. Even though Paul was a man of great faith and doing his best to serve God, his affliction was not healed. Instead God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” And Paul accepted that and went on to do great things for God and to be mightily used by God.

Our agenda may be to be healed or have some problem in our lives fixed. But God’s agenda is much deeper, broader, and wiser than ours. God wants us to grow in faith and in discipline and to know God’s glory and joy in our living.

Pastor Bill relates that when he returned to the pulpit after his injury, he spent 20 minutes gesturing in the air with his bandaged arm. After the service, a teenager with purple hair dared to ask him what others were too polite to ask. “What happened to your arm? Carpal tunnel syndrome?”

“No,” said Pastor Bill, “This is a real man’s injury. I cut it with a chainsaw.”

“Bummer, man,” said the kid. “You are just like me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I did a stupid things too,” he confided. “Busted by butt on my skateboard. Cracked my elbow. Hurt like the dickens. I couldn’t skate for two months. My friends made fun of me. Still hurts. I’m like you.”

Pastor Bill made a connection that day with an unlikely teenager. One that he would have been unlikely to make in other circumstances. Out of this bad thing that happened to Bill, God was bringing about good works in the kingdom. “God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.”

So where does this leave us? Is it possible that our prayers seem to be bouncing off the ceiling because we are too busy telling God what we want him to do for us and how to do it? What would happen if we spent more time being open to what God wants from us?

It is risky, I know. But it is also glorious. There is nothing that compares with knowing that you have been used by God to advance his kingdom. It is glorious!

Amen.