9-13-20 Sermon “Courageous Invitation”

 This is one of the most interesting and challenging stories in all of the Gospels. It touches on issues that are as prevalent today as they were in the time of Jesus. And to borrow from an adage often credited to indigenous tradition, “I don’t know whether this story actually happened or not, but I know it’s true.” And I say that for a couple of reasons: first, the story is told differently in the Gospels that tell it, as to whether there were one or two men among the tombs and there are conflicting accounts as to exactly where the story takes place. The second reason for wondering about the historicity of this story comes from a commentary written by Dr. Micah Kiel, Associate Professor of Theology at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa. Kiel writes that while teaching about this passage at a small Catholic parish somewhere in rural Iowa, a parish made up largely of pig farmers, one of the farmers raised his hand during the discussion and commented, “Everyone in this town is a hog farmer, and I don’t know whether you know this, but pigs can swim.”[[1]](#footnote-2) This then led to a discussion, Kiel writes, about ways in which this story is implausible and the reactions of the people in the biblical community illogical. Besides the aquatic skills of pigs, the “farmers noted that 2,000 dead pigs in the lake would have been disastrous, because it would have polluted the local water source,” not something, we might deduce in a “what-would-Jesus-do” kind of way, that Jesus would do. But then he goes on to say that “the Iowans were even more vehemently incensed at the reaction of the locals in the story. After a report quickly spread about what had happened, a crowd gathered around Jesus and the changed man. When the people saw the demoniac sitting, clothed, and in his right mind, they were terrified. The Iowan hog farmers,” he noted, “rightly focused on this reaction. ‘They should be mad because their pigs are dead, not afraid because of a demon that disappeared,’ one woman commented.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

 And it is in **this** idea that we, regardless of whether this actually happened, can begin to understand truth in this story. Regardless of what any of us believe or don’t believe about the presence of demons, or demon possession as described in this and other stories, we certainly understand both the presence of mental illness and of evil in the world. Most contemporary biblical scholars ascribe the various demons that are referenced in the bible to manifestations of addiction or various mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, manic-depressive disorders, and what is often thought of as multiple personality disorders. I can’t speak to that - it’s certainly not my areas of expertise - but I have seen examples of these conditions first hand on a couple of different occasions and they certainly seem consistent. And while I do not hold a belief in “the devil,” per se, that is the personification of evil in one person or one being (especially one in a red suit with horns and a pitchfork) I certainly believe in the presence of **forces** of evil in the world because I see evidence of them all the time.

 And I think that is the point that the woman in Iowa is making. In the aftermath of the events in the story, the people are not angry that their pigs, their livelihood, has been destroyed, they’re afraid because this man whom they had been unable to control despite all their best efforts, was now healed, he was normal, he was, for all intents and purposes, no different from them. This man whom they had marginalized, whom they had bound and chained and confined to life amongst the tombs, had been liberated by Jesus and they wanted nothing to do with either of them.

 And there is truth in that story for us as well, because we don’t have to look very far at all in our society in order to find the people whom our society, our world, have marginalized, have bound and chained in one way or another, and who live life amongst the tombs. My mother worked as a Psychiatric Attendant at the Madison State Hospital, a hospital for the mentally ill in my hometown. My older sister later worked there as a nurse and I worked there for two summers while I was in college. In college, my major was Political Science while my minor was in Criminology - I had originally intended to go to Law School until life got in the way. One area of study within the Criminology minor was Correctional Institutions, where we would visit and tour different prisons of varying security levels around the state. I was amazed to find during that time - during the early Reagan years when the mental health facilities were largely emptied or closed down for a lack of funding - that the prisons, as a result, filled with people whose criminality arose from untreated or under-treated mental illness. That’s still the case today, forty years later. The fact that it is only recently that laws have been passed mandating some level of insurance coverage for treatment of what are considered mental or emotional illnesses testifies to the stigma and marginalization that our society still attaches to these conditions, even as their presence becomes more ubiquitous.

 The #MeToo movement has brought to the forefront what we have known for many years, that women in our society are not valued in the same ways that men are, that they don’t receive equal pay for equal work, that there are some professions - such as the ministry - in which acceptance is hard to come by in some places, and that they are often subject to sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse in the workplace in ways and at a scale that many preferred not to acknowledge or confront until it became too much and too overpowering to ignore, to control, or to push into the whitewashed tombs of our world.

 At the same time, the Black Lives Matter movement has forced all of us to face four centuries of bondage - physical, economic, social, among others - that have been imposed on blacks and other people of color. And like that wife of the pig farmer in Iowa, many of us are shocked and bewildered as to why some people are more angry about broken store windows and looting than they are about the fact that young black men and women are being slaughtered on the streets of America, frequently by those who are sworn to “protect and serve” them, and that so many seem not to care, or not to care enough to do anything about it.

 So, this passage resonates in our world today. We are surrounded by demons of many kinds - including some of our own creation: addiction and mental health issues like depression or schizophrenia to begin with, but also social attitudes like racism, sexism, homophobia, misogyny and others, including fear - fear of failure, fear of others, fear of disease, fear of loneliness, fear of the loss of status or power - rational fears and irrational fears. We daily encounter demons of apathy, of anger, of overconfidence or even arrogance, and of exclusion. Every community in the world includes people who are marginalized in one way or another, whether because of their gender, their race, their sexual orientation, or because in many places even poverty and homelessness has been criminalized, who are viewed as “the other,” “different,” “dangerous”, or “less than;” **every** community.

 As Dr. Kiel points out, “These farmers in the middle of Iowa quickly identified the scandal of this passage. The Kingdom of God refuses to play by society’s rules. The demoniac had been dealt with. True, the people clearly would have preferred to bind him, but they nevertheless had found a way to marginalize him. He was among the tombs, sequestered, out of sight, out of mind.”[[3]](#footnote-4) And along with that I would offer that the Kin-dom of God also refuses to play by the Church’s rules, its history, or its traditions. Kiel continues, “it becomes increasingly clear that humanity - its society and institutions - impede the in-breaking of God’s kingdom more than it expedites [it]. The way the Kingdom of God breaks into the world in Mark’s story wrests control from humanity. Their way of ‘dealing’ with the demoniac - ostracism and segregation - is not tenable in God’s Kingdom.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

 Sometimes, in the church, our ways of doing things, our history and our tradition, get in the way of being good news to the community, rather than facilitating it. The institutional fear expressed in the idea of “we have never done it that way,” and it’s sister oath, “we have always done it this way,” testifies to the ways in which our own thinking sometimes **hinders** the work of the Holy Spirit in reaching out to the marginalized in our own community - attempting to bind and shackle God in the tombs of our own comforts and preferences - rather than **expediting** it.

 One of the ways that the church often does that, ironically, is through ministry. One church I served had two major ministry focuses when I arrived there: a much needed AA group that met at one end of the building, and a food pantry ministry that operated out of the other end. The pantry was run by a small group of volunteers who prepared and distributed boxes of food purchased through the mid-Ohio food bank. The volunteers would pack a prescribed number of identical food boxes that were handed out to people who called in and made reservations to pick up a box at an appointed time. That’s all well and good - as they say, the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. The boxes they used to pack the food, however, were empty beer boxes donated by a local bar, the owner of which was a friend of one of the pantry leaders. You’d have thought I’d walked into that scarlet and gray painted church wearing maize and blue when I pointed out the disconnect between helping folks deal with addiction at one end of the building while providing food in boxes promoting alcohol use at the other. And the leaders and volunteers of this pantry vehemently pointed out to me that the persons they did this ministry **“for”** didn’t care about the boxes, they cared about the food. Which might be true, but doing ministry **“for”** people in this way produced identical boxes of food for families that were anything but alike - evidenced by the food items that were often removed from the boxes and left behind in the church parking lot.

 Not long after that, the opportunity presented itself to me to find new leadership for this ministry, and in doing so we found a new way of being in ministry, not **“for”** the community, but **“with”** them. We temporarily closed down the pantry, revamped how we did things as well as how we thought about ministry, and reopened as a “choice pantry” where people could come in and choose their own food, taking what they would use and using what they took, in an empowering way that respected them as fellow human beings on the journey rather than as needy people whose marginalization we had only furthered by doing **our** ministry **“for”** them. In fact, a growing number of volunteers in the new pantry came from the community that was served by the pantry. You see, doing ministry “for” another is often not about them at all, it’s about **us** feeling good about ourselves. Doing ministry **“with”** is about relationship, it’s about coming alongside those who have been marginalized, pushed to the edges, through the love of God to **be** the good news, to be the hands and feet of God. Sharing love in the name of Jesus means moving from acts of charity into building relationships - from “doing for” to “being with.”

 So, the questions we are compelled to consider are: how are we building relationships with those on the margins of our community - both as individuals and as a congregation? And if the answer is, “we’re not,” or “not very well,” then we must ask ourselves how we MIGHT build relationships? How do we move beyond a sense of charity or mission and become true friends?

 In our earlier reading from Mark 4 Jesus tells and then explains the parable of the sower who scatters seed, some on good soil and others on not so good soil. And the story of the changed demoniac in chapter 5 answers a question that lingered at the end of chapter 4: who is the good soil? As Kiel suggests, “the seed clearly has taken root in the demoniac, the least significant and least likely place imaginable…His change comes through no human initiative whatsoever.” That is to say, the human efforts to bind, restrain, marginalize, and segregate the man didn’t bring about this change. “In the demoniac,” Kiel observes, “the reader finally meets an example of the good soil. The seed takes root in the absolute last place anyone would look or expect. And, this is not a temporary blooming, later to wither away. The man earnestly asks Jesus if he might [go] with him.” Note, none of those who **witnessed** the miraculous work of Jesus with this man begged to follow Jesus - to the contrary, they begged Jesus to **leave** their town. But rather than allow the now healed man to come with him, Jesus sends him as a disciple, to share the good news of what God had done for him. And he does this so well that people are amazed.

 So, what are the seeds of “ministry with” that God is calling us to plant **here** for the marginalized in **our** community? What are the ministries that we do “for” others that need to be transformed into ministries we do “with” others, that the good news of God’s love might be seen in the lives of those who feel imprisoned in some societal tomb? A couple of weeks ago in the message I scattered some seeds as I invited us to think about who are considered “outsiders” in our community and how we might, through opening up the patio area of our church building by providing more seating areas and accessibility, make that a safe space for people who otherwise might not consider the church a safe place. Today, in the spirit of the parable of the sower and trusting that this message will fall into some some good soil among you, let me scatter another handful of seeds. And again, let me do that through the framework of our campus ministry, since our community is most closely related, geographically and historically, with Otterbein.

 We have two major feeding ministries that we do each year under “normal” circumstances - the Spaghetti Dinner and Midnight Pancakes. Both of these “event-oriented” ministries feed hundreds of people one time each semester. A lot of time and energy goes into the preparation of the space and of the food, dozens of volunteers serve in many different ways to make this happen. And it’s great! The food is good - the energy is high - the students all appreciate it and they tell us so. So let me ask you some questions for your consideration. How many college students do we currently have involved in the life of the church because of relationships we have built through these two ministries? Other than the obvious answer of getting a free meal - which I can attest from personal experience is ALWAYS important to a college student - what other things do the students who attend gain from the experience? I know the hope is that through these meals we’ll be able to build relationships with students as they are eating, but realistically, they largely come in groups with their friends and they’re not at all interested in sitting and talking or building relationships with church people, they’re interested in eating and catching up with their friends. And in the case of Midnight Pancakes, for many it serves as an opportunity either to get food on their stomachs before they go out for a night of drinking, or, as we determined last year when we found several beer cans in the fellowship hall, as a break **during** their drinking. And besides that, Otterbein provides a pancake feast for the students just a few days apart from ours. So, are these two ministries “with” or ministries “for” ministries? Is our primary motivation for doing these ministries in these ways about us, because “we have always done it that way?” How might we transform our feeding ministries in ways that would better enable us to **truly** build relationships with students and others in our community rather than just being another feeding trough, if you will?

 Well, what if, rather than a mass feeding ministry once or twice a semester, we offered a smaller number of students an opportunity to be fed both physically and spiritually on a more regular basis, monthly or even weekly, through a shared meal and discussion time in a ministry such as a dinner church? The early church was nothing if it was not a dinner church. They didn’t have buildings, they gathered in homes around the table, shared in meals together, shared stories about Jesus and what he meant to them and to how they should live their lives. This was when and how the early church was most impactful, when and how it saw exponential growth. Jesus’ feeding of the multitudes was a wonderful event, but Jesus didn’t make it a regular part of his ministry. No, he did that once, maybe twice depending on which Gospel account you read. But he frequently and regularly went into peoples’ homes, gathered around the table with them, and built relationships. That is how the gospel, the good news, spreads. That is how Jesus made a difference in people’s lives - not by what he did “for” them, five thousand at a time, but by what he did “with” them - those on the outside, the tax collectors and sinners, the marginalized and segregated, the demon possessed and those with physical ailments.

 And that is what the church as the body of Christ is called to do and to be today. Remember the words of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, that the church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members. I’m sorry if over the years the church has somehow made you think it was **all** about you. It’s only partially about you. The primary call of body of Christ that is the church is to reach out to those Jesus reached out to, those on the margins, those on the edge, those whom society has relegated to the ghettos, the food banks, the free clinics, the jails and prisons, and to be the presence of Jesus with them. We create new places for new people when we take the old places and the old ways and transform them into the likeness of the Kingdom of God, and when those of us on the inside transform ourselves in such a way that our desire and our mission is about building relationships of love with those Christ points us to on the margins. That is the invitation Jesus extends to us. And the question that comes with that invitation is simply this: do we have the courage to accept?

Amen.

1. Kiel, Micah, [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org)*,* Commentary on Mark 5:2-13, January 12, 2012, Accessed September 2, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)