

Emancipation Proclamation

Mark 5:1-20

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, (June 27) 2021

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Sin is not something we do; it is something we're in.

- Flannery O'Connor

Our story this morning picks up immediately following the first stormy crossing of the Sea of Galilee that we talked about last Sunday. Mark says, “They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes, and when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him” (5:1-2).

According to Mark, this man is bruised and cut up from trying to hurt himself. He has open wounds from the shackles and chains that people have tried to restrain him with but he keeps breaking free. No one can control him and he can't control himself, and he lives outside of any of the nearby towns, in the cemetery. He is the ultimate “other” living in a cemetery, the ultimate unclean place.

From our perspective he is obviously suffering from some sort of psychosis. Mark says he is possessed by an unclean spirit – a demon or, as we'll learn, a whole bunch of demons. New Testament scholar Walter Wink said that he is possessed by the spirituality of the Dominating Systems of the Powers. He is in bondage to Sin and Death.

I remember in 1985 when I was in jail in Washington D.C. for non-violent civil disobedience blocking the driveway to the State Dept., there was a guy in the cell next to me, who throughout the night would pace back and forth, beating his own head against the concrete wall, chanting over and over, "I've got to get out of here. I've got to get out of here. I've got to get out of here." Every once in a while, a guard would yell at him, "Shut up wild man!" The next day, he asked me through the bars, who I was and why was I there. He seemed to take great encouragement knowing that I was a minister, and I prayed for him through the bars. During a brief time I had outside the cell to walk around, he asked me to speak to him through the bars because the guards would not let him out of his cell. He was younger than me, probably no more than his early 20's, forehead bruised, cut, and swollen, a black man who had been arrested for stealing baby formula from a convenience store, and had been assigned a court-appointed attorney. After three months in jail, he still had not heard from his attorney. As soon as we middle-class White clergy got out of jail, we made sure he got an attorney.

In our story from Mark, when this wild man comes up to Jesus I think of that young man in jail.

In Mark, this possessed wild man starts shouting, "Jesus, Son of the Most High God, what are you going to do? Don't start messing with me! I'm possessed. I'm imprisoned. I can't get free; it has become what I know. Just 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." More than one New Testament scholar has made the connection of a man possessed by a "legion" of demons is also in a land oppressed by a legion of the Roman Empire. It

was an area where retired Roman army soldiers were encouraged to live with the enticement of free land. And it was the region called the Decapolis, for ten Greek-speaking cities which had a couple of centuries of independence until Rome and Herod came along. These cities kept rebelling against Rome's heavy hand and in turn, Rome had practiced *decimation* – lining up the entire village or city, and killing every tenth person, then they crucified the leaders.

What had this man seen or experienced, what had he done or what had been done to him or to his family, that the possessing spiritual Powers of his life called themselves “Legion?” Here he was living in a region colonized by Rome and in turn, this colonization had internalized itself in him.

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 possessed man sitting there calmly, all dressed in clean and neat clothing and in his right mind. He has been liberated and set free. He is whole.

The owners of the pigs come running up and they are upset! Jesus is disrupting their business, messing up their lifestyle, and he has to go. It is instructive to see how sick systems respond when one person gets healthy and whole. Or how sick societies respond when a minority in the society decides they're not going to put up with the sickness anymore.

Rev. Otis Moss Jr. commented forty years ago, “As long as we were struggling in the cotton fields... with our sacks across our shoulders... picking cotton and having our fingers burning from the stinging worms that would hide under the cotton leaves; as long as we were barefoot, actually and symbolically, laughing when we were not tickled... America was satisfied... But one day America saw us marching to the voting booth, sitting down at lunch counters, and all America became afraid” (from “Going from Grace to Dignity,” in *Preaching the Gospel*, ed. Henry J. Young, Fortress Pr., 1976, p. 52-53).

Rev. Moss was saying that Jim Crow systems did not like it when Black folks woke and decided they were not going to put up with Jim Crow any longer. The Powers of Sin and Death and racism did not like it then, and they still don't like it today.

Notice that the Power of Sin and Death, personified by the spirit of Legion, is not simply about what this man does. It is what's in him and what he is in. He is caught in it and is powerless to be free from it.

American Christians tend to think of Sin as specific, episodic actions done by specific individuals. We think in terms of “sins” and not “Sin.” We tend to think that sins are about individuals making bad choices and doing or not doing specific and particular actions.

This has a lot to do with why American Christians have difficulty with the old bedrock Christian doctrine of “original sin.” The Apostle Paul tried to figure out the universality of sin in terms of tracing it back to old Adam in Romans 5-6-7.

St. Augustine, in the early fifth century, sought to expand on Paul's thinking saying that sin was passed down from Adam through sexual procreation generation to generation.

This morning, I want to emphasize that the doctrine of original sin has less to do with how sin started or how it was passed down, and everything with sin's pervasiveness and universality. It is everywhere and in everyone and in every institution and always has been over time. As the Apostle Paul said in Romans, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). That means all people and all institutions.

As an aside, the historian Herbert Butterfield once said that the doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine within the Christian faith. Or as the old joke goes, a boy asked his grandfather, "Grandfather, do you believe in original sin?" The old man responded, "Believe in it? Son, I've seen it!"

Sin is something bigger and older than individuals. As Flannery O'Connor once said in a letter, "Sin is not simply what we do. It is what we're in."

It is also why we American Christians have a difficult time saying the Corporate Confession on Sunday mornings, because we tend to think, "I didn't do those things so I should not confess them." But we say a Corporate Confession every Sunday because we are to remember that we participate in Sin. It is corporate and communal and bigger than we are.

At the same time, we are complicit in Sin. We are captive to it but we are also active, conscripted agents of Sin. We are in it and we do it. Sin feeds on itself

and has a life of its own once it is unleashed. One sin leads to another and to others, like a pandemic. We are infected by sin and it infects everyone and everything around us and beyond in all kinds of ways.

Let me mention a contemporary example that might give us an idea of why this is important. White Americans tend to think that racism is about what individuals believe or do. So, we individuals think that if we're "color-blind" or do not do hateful racist things, then we think we are not racists. We White people think in terms of specific racist actions done by individuals is what makes a racist.

Critical Race Theory, which the conservatives in both religion and politics are so enraged over, is simply the notion that racism is systemic and pervasive and bigger than we are. It is something that stretches across time and is institutional and corporate and communal as well as individual. To paraphrase Flannery O'Connor's earlier quote, "Racism is not something that we do as much as it is something we're in." If we believe the old doctrine of original sin, then believing in Critical Race Theory is not hard to do.

For example, in 2010 Black Americans made up 13% of the population but had only 2.7% of the country's wealth. The median net worth for a White family was \$134,000, but the median net worth for a Latinx family was \$14,000 and for a Black family it was \$11,000. Know also that the single greatest source of net worth for a family in America is their home and the wealth that has accumulated through generations from inheritance and sale and re-sale of homes.

According to Richard Rothstein's award-winning 2017 book, *The Color of Law*, one of the most important strategies of FDR's New Deal in the 1930's was

helping American families break the cycle of poverty during the Depression by buying their first house. Then this really took off after WWII by building subsidized housing using federal tax dollars and also using FHA insured loans, American families were able to break the cycle of poverty and start building wealth that grew over generations. Rothstein's book demonstrates how Black Americans were systematically excluded from those programs.

To be set free from and overcome such systemic racism takes more than individual White people saying, "I'm color-blind," or "I have friends who are Black" or "let's all be nice." Partly it means talking about reparations which might include changing how the FHA insure loans and how the federal government can change how it subsidizes home loans, so Black families can buy their first home.

We can see how and why racism is systemic and institutional, as well as personal. We participate in it even when we don't know it.

One more thing briefly, as we talk about original sin. This morning, it might be helpful to also think about Sin and the Power of Death as an addiction. Like AA, we confess that we're powerless over Sin and that our lives have become unmanageable. We confess only a Power greater than ourselves can restore us, in our case, the God we know in Jesus Christ. And we go on, confessing, repenting, and making an honest inventory of ourselves and naming and admitting it to God and to another person. Then we pray for and support one another and hold each other accountable. We call it church.

This is exactly what the possessed wild man does in our story today. When he, or the possessing Powers, confess the name of "Legion" to Jesus, he is naming

his addiction. His life is out of control and there is nothing he can do to free himself from the Powers of Sin and Death which are destroying him. Only one greater than himself and outside of himself can free him from his bondage, which is exactly what Christ does. Not only frees him but destroys the source of his addiction in the pigs.

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 gives the man an emancipation proclamation. “You are free. You no longer are enslaved to Legion, the Powers of Sin and Death. Now go proclaim to others this same emancipation.”

On January 1, 1863 Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. And those of us who are White have learned, it was not until June 19, 1865 that enslaved people in Texas heard the news of their freedom. They were free but had not heard about it, and therefore, could not start living into it.

But the Emancipation Proclamation was for those of us who are White too. We White folks must be set free from the Powers of Racism that deform us, diminish us, and destroy us as well as deform, diminish, and destroy those of us who are people of color. What’s more, it deforms, diminishes, and destroys our entire society. It is an ongoing struggle to be free. So, every Sunday White folks like me confess, “My name is Kyle and I’m a recovering racist, and by the grace of Jesus Christ I am set free.” Then, Christ calls us go back to our homes and

community and live it out and spread the good news. That's our emancipation proclamation.

Historian Heather Cox Richardson tells how Frederick Douglas escaped from slavery in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1838. He was a slave working in the shipyards and, as far as slavery was concerned, he was in a pretty good position. He could stay enslaved where he was and get by okay. Nevertheless, Douglas wanted to be free. It was highly risky. If he was caught, there is no doubt he would be sold "down the river" to work in the harsh conditions of Mississippi where he would surely die.

Free black sailors, who were around the shipyards all the time, carried papers proving to southern authorities that they were free. In the days before photo I.D.'s it was not too much to get papers that might allow Douglas to show he was a free black sailor, as long as the White authority did not read too closely. Douglas had a black sailor friend who lent him his papers to use.

Cox Richardson writes: *To escape from slavery, all Douglass had to do was board a train. That's it: he just had to step on a train. If he were lucky, and the railroad conductor didn't catch him, and no one recognized him and called him out, he could be free. But if he were caught, he would be sold down river, almost certainly to his death.*

To me, Douglass's decision to step aboard that train is everything. How many of us would have taken that risk, especially knowing that even in the best case, success would mean trying to build a new life, far away from everyone we had ever known? Douglass's step was such a little one, such an easy one... except that it meant the difference between life and death, the difference between a

forgotten, enslaved shipyard worker and the great Frederick Douglass, who went on to become a powerful voice for American liberty (from Heather Cox Richardson blog, May 23, 2021).

Austin Heights Baptist Church Jesus Christ comes us in our cemeteries of death – for many of us, they are comfortable places, but they are places that hold us in bondage and diminish us and keep us enslaved. We can go along and get along, keep quiet and try to be at ease.

Yet, Christ proclaims our emancipation...

All we have to do is step on that train.

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