

Jesus Heals the Gerasene Demoniac

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes,^[a] which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn^[b] no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me'— ²⁹ for Jesus^[c] had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons^[d] begged Jesus^[e] to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes^[f] asked Jesus^[g] to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus^[h] sent him away, saying, ³⁹ 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

On June 18th of last year, June 19th was declared a federal day of observance: “to acknowledge and celebrate the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of Black Americans and commit together to eradicate systemic racism that still undermines our founding ideals and collective prosperity.”¹ There is great Providence in the fact that today's, June 19th's lectionary Gospel is this story of Jesus releasing a possessed man from both literal and spiritual bonds.

Immediately prior to today's passage, Jesus and the disciples got into stormy seas on the Sea of Galilee, threatening the safety of their boat, and ending with Jesus ordering the wind and waves to stop. The Sea of Galilee is in northern Israel, with Jesus' home

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/18/a-proclamation-on-juneteenth-day-of-observance-2021/> accessed May 19, 2022.

region, Galilee, on the western side of the body of water. This sea has several different names and commentators suggest that Christian Jews coined the term Sea of Galilee “based on their belief that Jesus’ ministry by the lake was a fulfillment of Isaiah 9:1.”² That brings us to the town of Gerasenes. This healing story appears in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark and Luke utilize the name Gerasenes, which is an area thirty miles south of the water; however, Matthew uses Gadarenes, which is a region on the southeast part of the Sea of Galilee.³ The scholarly debates on which name is correct or if it was intentionally changed by Greek scribes really is irrelevant to the importance of Jesus’ miraculous healing and the ensuing interchange with the healed man and townspeople in a Gentile area which is implied by the presence of swine in the story.⁴

I leave this lectionary reading with more questions than answers regarding application for the Church today. The primary actors in the story are: Jesus (and God through Jesus), the possessed man, the demonic spirits, the swine herdsman, and the townspeople. The disciples are not specifically mentioned in this text, though they likely arrived and departed with Jesus via boat. There are myriad questions we could each come up with, but we need to narrow the focus for a 15-minute sermon...right? In my study of the text, I gravitated towards the post-healing words and actions of the townspeople and the previously possessed man. The main question I continued to ask myself is where we see today’s Church within those examples.

Let us begin with the previously possessed man. After the swineherds relay to the townspeople what happened: Jesus ordering the spirits into the herd of swine which run into the water and drown. The townspeople then run into Jesus, finding the man who used to be bound and shackled in the tombs “clothed and in his right mind” sitting at Jesus’ feet. The man asks to accompany Jesus, but Jesus tells the man to go home and “declare how much God has done for you.” The man complies with Jesus’ direction, “proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” This picture somewhat parallels Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, ultimately becoming a tremendous missionary for Christ and building up the early Church in the Gentile world. The healed man essentially acted as a missionary in the Gentile world, as did Paul. It is interesting that he told others what Jesus had done for him, as opposed to using Jesus’ suggested verbiage “what God has done” for him. This change of wording is not a stretch for those of us who embrace the Trinity: we would say that God did the healing through Jesus, as they are one with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this is the author of Luke’s attempt to emphasize Christ’s identity as the Son of God. A native, Gentile missionary found within a group asking Jesus to leave them is a surprising paradox.

² Yohanan Aharoni. *The Carta Bible Atlas*. 5th ed. (Jerusalem: Carta, 2011), 177.

³ Aharoni, 177.

⁴ Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version*. 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1884.

What about those townspeople who asked Jesus to leave because they were afraid. Specifically, the author of Luke says “they were seized with great fear” because of what Jesus had done to heal the man. The Greek noun used for “fear” is φόβος (“fear”, both noun and verb, appears 47 times in NT and 262 times in OT)⁵. A Greek lexicon provides several different options for context. Intimidation, awe-inspiring, alarm, fright, reverence, and respect (towards God or humans such as officials) are included as possible contexts for this Greek word.⁶ So, why were the Gentile townspeople afraid and what were they afraid of? How did they develop that fear? The swineherds told the people what had happened “in the city and in the country” which prompted the townspeople to come and see for themselves. They found the healed man sitting at Jesus’ feet and this seems to have prompted their fear. The Common English Bible uses the phrase “they were filled with awe” in verse 35, and then shifts to “overcome with fear” in verse 37. Why weren’t they grateful one of their brothers was now healed and whole? Why weren’t they grateful the man was no longer a danger to society? Why were they afraid? Were they intimidated by the healing Jesus had done? Or, had a sense of reverence or respect come over them after seeing the miraculous recovery of their fellow townsman? If we reach forward into Acts, which most scholars believe is a companion book to Luke, we might even think it is possible that they feared for their swine business model as Jesus’ actions killed the livestock they intended for food and/or commerce. Theologian Charles Talbert shares, “the one who has universal power is also the one whose rejection is sometimes tied to the threat he poses to economic interests.”⁷

Whatever the reason behind the townspeople’s fear, the juxtaposition of the townspeople’s fearful reaction against the healed man’s grateful attitude and gracious actions as a missionary may be the key takeaway Luke’s author was hoping for. After all, this story is the second in a series of three stories of Jesus’ miracles: calming the sea, healing the possessed man, and healing two women. Interestingly, as a side note, Jesus tells the man in today’s passage to tell others what God has done for him, while in the next miraculous account Jesus directs the joyous parents of a girl brought back to life not to tell anyone. Perhaps the Gerasenes townspeople’s reaction was the reason for Jesus’ hesitation. Or, perhaps it was geography, as Jesus was back in Galilee for the third miraculous sequence as opposed to in a Gentile area across the sea. Whatever the case, the text uncovers through comparison the essence of what it means to be Christians and part of the Church universal.

So...let’s talk about the Church (with a capital C) today. I was listening to one of my favorite YouTube videos a few weeks ago, The Irish Blessing, which I listened to a lot when we were all locked down during COVID. In the video, made in May 2020 by more than 300 churches (with small c’s) in Ireland, individuals sang, danced, played drums in

⁵ <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Gen-Mal|syntax=t=fear&options=NHVUG> accessed June 1, 2022

⁶ Danker, Frederick W. (Frederick William). *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd Ed. (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 2000), 1062.

⁷ Karris, Robert J. 2001. “Bonaventure and Talbert on Luke 8:26-39: Christology, Discipleship, and Evangelization.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28 (1), 64

their homes and churches and then someone mixed it all into one video for people like us to watch. I recalled while watching that many cities, states, and countries did the same thing during COVID with “The Blessing,” which is a cover of Kari Jobe’s “Blessing.” The lyrics are very simple: the Numbers 6 passage frequently used in Benedictions. “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and bring you peace.” The world needed healing during the pandemic, which was marked by not only illness but also loneliness and division. One of my favorite versions of this cover is “The Blessing South Africa.” We are all aware of the history of Apartheid in South Africa prior to 1990, so it was amazing to see a diverse, unified group of South Africans singing together “a blessing over [their] nation.” Friends, this is part of what the Church (with a capital C) is called to do. The Book of Order, which is Part II of our church constitution defines the calling of the Church in the beginning of the Book of Order.

The Book of Order has several sections, the first of which is “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity.” This section is less about how many meetings per year the congregation is required to have and more about the underlying theological principles and ideals behind the resulting “Form of Government” rules. I am currently taking a Seminary course on Presbyterian Polity. In the Foundations section of the Book of Order, Jesus’ place as Head of the Church and the role of the Church as Christ’s Body are emphasized. The “Calling of the Church” (with a capital C) is articulated beginning with “The Church Is the Body of Christ” and ending with “The Great Ends of the Church.” While there is also a focus on the “Marks of the Church” and “Notes of the Reformed Church,” I’d like us to focus today on the call section.

The first area under the “Calling of the Church” section is “The Church is the Body of Christ.” This section assures us Christ has given us everything we need to “be [Jesus’] body” and “demonstrate these gifts in [our] life as a community in the world.” One particular sentence in the Church’s call stands out to me in relation to our lectionary text’s description of the townspeople and healed man: “The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.”⁸ Jesus did not ask the fearful townspeople explicitly to do anything. Jesus did, however, direct the man he healed to tell others what God has done for him. Like many stories in Scripture, we are not provided with every detail in the account. For example, I wonder if the healed man wanted to “settle scores” with his fellow townspeople who may have exiled him to live in chains in the tombs. It is certainly not a part of Scripture in any of the three gospel accounts. In fact, the Mark account uses this language: “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you.”⁹ Jesus’ call is a call of peace: a call to spread and show the good news of Jesus healing power, grace, and mercy.

⁸ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, The Book of Order, 2019-2021*. (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 2.

⁹ *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels*. 5th Ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 83.

So, where does the Church universal sit today as a “community of love?” I mentioned the numerous churches who shared “The Blessing” with millions of isolated people around the world during COVID (the United Kingdom version alone has 5 million views on YouTube). This was a unique situation and response...an awesome example of the Church answering the call. In concert with the calling of the Church, the Book of Order also provides us expectations for us individually. In the “Form of Government” section, one finds a header labeled “The Ministry of Members.” Lest we think of these as rules only for Presbyterians, I will share that the language is focused on “bearing witness to God’s love and grace...in the ministry of Christ’s Church.” The examples of such involvement includes: proclaiming the good news in word and deed; taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation; lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support; studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life; demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church; responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others; working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment; caring for God’s creation, among others.¹⁰ I do not bring these up as a “to do” list of things we should check off individually or at Session meetings, but they are pretty great things for us Christians to strive for in our lives as members of the Church universal. Let’s think about the direction to “serve others.” This is something the people of Grace First Presbyterian do very well for both each other and the surrounding community.

In addition to a long history of service and outreach, during COVID, Grace First earnestly studied justice-related issues to address those faced in the community. But, it did not stop there. Over the past year, Grace First has continued to add ministry and volunteer programs that support efforts like fighting hunger. Each month, there are opportunities to volunteer at the local food bank. There are also opportunities to serve meals to groups in Weatherford in need of support or help keep the Community Garden on the “back forty” flourishing. Many of you were also a part of our first “Community Meal” served in the church parking lot. (Pastor David and team cooked some pretty awesome burgers and dogs!) These are markers of a “community of love” and are also aligned with our denomination’s Matthew 25 initiative Grace First joined. These efforts have an army of people and energy behind them, including those who pray for them.

So, what can we take away from today’s text? Today’s lectionary reading is an opportunity for us to not only remember Jesus’ amazing healing power and God’s mercy and grace but also understand that there are two responses to this knowledge: gratitude or fear. I submit that Grace First Presbyterian does a lot to show gratitude for all God has done for us. Let us strive to harness the same level of excitement and eagerness as the man Jesus healed as we continue to answer Christ’s call to be a community of love. Amen.

¹⁰ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, The Book of Order, 2019-2021.* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 21.