

Authority, Community, and Identity

Psalm 145:8-19 Mark 5:1-20

Continuing our series in Mark's gospel. Note: in Mark, Jesus is relatively quiet; he's a Messiah of few words (relatively). In Matthew, Jesus teaches the sermon on the mount and tells a lot of parables. In Luke, Jesus engages in conversation with a lot of people, and Luke includes many parables and teachings not included in the other gospels. In John, Jesus has long dialogues and teachings, and feisty conversations with the Pharisees and priests. Also in John, the Maundy Thursday discourse—a very long teaching—takes up almost a third of John's gospel.

In Mark, Jesus is a messiah of few words. But a lot of actions! In fact, in Mark, Jesus goes from one activity to another, and most of his actions are of healing, casting out demons, and revealing his authority over creation (as you heard last week; thank you Dianna!).

Commentators believe that Mark wrote his gospel this way so that his readers/hearers would sit with the questions they have, and figure things out on their own, without a lot of explanation. Because in Mark, Jesus doesn't give us a lot of explanations. Mostly, actions. So, with the disciples, we follow in faith, sit with our questions, realize that we can't know everything (and we probably aren't

supposed to know everything!) and yet we are invited to know that, though Jesus is relatively quiet (in Mark's gospel at least), he is strong, and... he has authority.

To do good! We are invited to trust in his serene power.

We will see all of this in today's account. There are questions that this account raises, and all of those questions can't be answered all at once. With this in mind, let's listen to our account from Mark 5:1-20. This is what follows the stilling of the storm.

Mark 5:1-20

5They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes ("the other side of the lake" is code for: not Jewish territory; this is gentile territory, the land of religious outsiders). ²And when he 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.

14 The 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 neighborhood. 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.

This is the word of the Lord.

As I dwelt on this passage this week, I'll be honest: I wasn't sure where to go with this. And maybe you were wondering that too! ("Where is he going to go with this?") There is a lot going on in this story! And, it's unique among Jesus' encounters with demons and unclean spirits, and in his healing ministry.

Then it occurred to me, that there are fascinating reactions from each of the characters. So here was my idea: Why not look at the narrative three times, through the eyes of three primary characters or groups Jesus encounters? They may each have something to teach us.

First, the story of the community (village, neighborhood, friend group)

The story that frames the action is that of the gentile community where Jesus landed in the boat. They had a troubled member. If he was encountered today most people would probably say that he was mentally ill. Or they might suspect he was addicted to drugs. Some commentators think this man had a severe mental illness (because they didn't have a name for it back then except "unclean spirit" or "demons"). Others say he truly was demonized, but I don't want to get into that debate. I *will* say that I tend to take Scripture at face value and if it says he was demonized I tend to believe that was the case. So I'm working with this morning's account from that perspective.

Mark tells us that the man had superhuman strength, often broke loose from his chains, and would run into the wilderness, and we can assume that the people of his community were afraid of him. So they had to do something about him. But what do you do with a disruptive person who could cause harm to others and, as Mark tells us, who harms himself? Somebody had a bright idea: chain him up on the far edge of town, among the tombs.

So, they did. And when he broke the chains, they would catch him again and restrain him again, and he would break the chains again. What were they to do? They tried to help him—if you can call this help—because he was one of them. But they had no way to truly help him, because it was a situation that was out of

their control. I sense compassion on the part of the community because they could have done away with him, but they didn't. So they did what they could and kept him at a safe distance. And so, he lived in isolation in, literally, a place of death.

But then, word reached the people: someone drove all the pigs to jump off the cliff. It was by the tombs. It must have been the guy with the demons.

Now, this was bad news. That herd of pigs was somebody's business. A big business, given the size of the herd, and probably a significant part of the local economy. How were the owners supposed to survive if some demonized guy kills the entire herd? How will this affect their community? So, you can hear them thinking, the madman has gone too far this time. You can imagine them grabbing their pitchforks and torches. They marched to the tombs.

And there was the troublemaker. They found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

Perhaps you would think the crowd would be happy. I mean they were tired of his demon-driven antics. They had been afraid. Yes, they were afraid of the demonized man, but changing the status quo, even for the better, also left them afraid. Who was going to pay for those pigs? Now what? What if this kind of thing keeps happening? What does this mean for our way of life?

Then they heard the story. Jesus had healed the man. They had to admit this was a good thing. But still... those pigs! They just couldn't get over the fact that Jesus' miracle had such a negative economic impact. So they begged Jesus to leave. Mark puts it this way: they begged him to leave their neighborhood. As a side note, there is a playful contrast to The Message translation of John 1:13 (traditionally: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"). In the Message: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." Well, here is a community that wants Jesus to *leave* the neighborhood! Because Jesus has disrupted the status quo; he disrupted their social order. And it was costly.

And you know, it's kind of like that in the world. Sometimes the community doesn't really want its problems solved, even if they say they do. Changing the status quo makes people afraid. As the old saying goes, we often prefer the devil we know to the freedom that we don't. So, changing the status quo, upsetting the social order to which people are accustomed to, can make people afraid. And, it can be costly.

- If we were to do what is needed to solve the problem of global warming, that would be costly.
- If we were to do what is needed to solve the problem of gun violence it would be costly.

- If we were to do what is needed to solve the problem of white supremacist movements, it would be costly.

Solve any one of those problems and you're likely to be told to leave town. But it would surely be worth it, wouldn't it? That's the story of the community.

The story of the demons

This is also a story that can be told from the perspective of a huge number of demons. Now, I have never told a story in a sermon from the perspective of demons or evil spirits, but this is so intriguing to me from this story and this one alone, in the Bible. Because, Jesus does some negotiating with them, which is a head-scratcher to me, but it's also very savvy as we will see.

We are not told how the demons found their way into the man. That's a way of saying, there is no blame here. The Bible rarely asks about the origins of evil like this. We only know: The man said he was "legion." In the Roman army that was 6000 troops. Somehow this legion took up residence in a man whose name is now forgotten — they subsumed it with their evil presence.

And it's kind of like *that* in the world too, isn't it? With so many people overwhelmed and bombarded with a legion of identities, they have lost or forgotten who they really are. We'll come back to this in a moment.

Anyway, we don't know how they entered this man. It's clear, though, that this legion of demons required a host, and they found one.

When Jesus showed up, they knew they were outmatched — in all of the accounts like this, the demons *always* recognize Jesus. And the demons always knew that Jesus was powerful.

And Mark tells us they begged Jesus not to send them out of the country—or, as Luke details it, “into the abyss.” They see a herd of pigs grazing on the hillside, and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these.

So, here is a thought. Please bear with me, because this might sound odd. I thought of this request from the demons in the same way that anyone makes a request of Jesus: the demons are praying to Jesus. They are making a request of God in the flesh—the one who has authority, which they recognize. So, we might think of it as prayer. A bargaining type of prayer, but still prayer.

And, *Jesus answers their prayer*. Jesus says “yes” to the prayers of demons. Why in the world would Jesus grant the request of an unclean spirit, or a legion of demons, let alone even listen to them? Why would Jesus give them what they asked for? Why not just shut them up and send them away, like he usually does?

Here is where Jesus' savvy comes in. And a little background and understanding from the ancient world's view of evil spirits helps. In their

worldview, and experience, water is deadly to evil spirits. They cannot survive in water. (Maybe this is why the wicked witch of the west was done in by water 😊. Maybe L. Frank Baum knew something...). This was their world view, and it's even seen in the New Testament. For example, in a couple places in the gospels, Jesus describes demons as living "waterless regions" (Luke 11:24), as they seek a place to land. They don't want to be around water, because it's deadly to them.

So when the demons ask Jesus to go into the pigs—because they want a host instead of open air or the abyss—he says yes, because, Jesus knew that they could be done in by drowning, which is what happened. Obviously the demons didn't think this through before making their request.

That's the story of the demons. But it's ultimately the story of Jesus, the One who has full authority, even over the spirit world. He has authority over the physical world, as he witnessed in the stilling of the storm. He also has authority over the spirit world.

Finally, the story of the man.

The most important thing to notice about him is that he has lost his identity—his name. And as I read this passage last week, I felt like this is one of the saddest lines in the Bible: when Jesus asks him his name, he can't say it. He can only say,

my name is legion, for we are many. What a loss of identity; such a confusion of who he truly is.

Again, think how many people today could answer this question, “What is your name?” with their own version of “my name is legion,” because of the bombardment of names and identities and roles they have taken on that have caused them to forget who they truly are. And the confusion of identity because of the bombardment of *expectations* placed upon them by society, or by their employer, their family, or that they have placed on themselves.

And for our guy in this morning’s account, this torment drove him away from himself, but also from community. He is utterly isolated.

And so, Jesus not only frees him—picture him sitting at Jesus’ feet in his right mind (ahh, such clarity!). But not only that, Jesus does one more beautiful thing...

As Jesus is about to leave the neighborhood (he grants the community’s prayer request too, to leave—their loss!), the man begs Jesus to let him come along with him, which Jesus normally would respond to by saying, “Of course, follow me!” “Follow me” is Jesus’ call to discipleship. So let’s think of this, also, as a prayer request: let me come along with you. But Jesus’ reply to this prayer is... no. Jesus responds to this prayer by redirecting his request, and sending him home.

This is a touching and beautiful part of the story because in sending him home Jesus accomplishes two things: First, he restores the man to his community. The tormented man would be received back as a member of his community, and learn to relate to his community in a fresh way. It's a new start. And, part of this restoration is that he could receive a new identity among people who had dealt with him only by incarcerating him and keeping him at a distance. Their work of restoration is to say to him: "Your name is not legion. Your name is _____." Only they could do that, given their experience with him. Jesus restores him to community.

Second, Jesus sends him back to his community because he had a story to tell, and his community needed to hear that story. They wouldn't keep *Jesus* around, but they had *him* as Jesus' ambassador and representative of what God can do. As he tells his story, maybe they will begin to open up. Maybe Jesus can come back and be received without fear. So this man becomes a sign for them of what God can do for them, in their midst. If Mary Magdalene is the first apostle to the apostles, announcing that Jesus has risen from the dead, this man is the first apostle to the Gentiles, by telling what Jesus has done for him.

This got me thinking: we need to hear each other's God stories! We need to share our experiences of what God has done for us. Not because we don't

want Jesus around and we're afraid. But we need these stories to be encouraged, strengthened, to grow our faith. Because there is always more that Jesus *can* do; and we can always open up to God's Spirit at work in new ways.

So, I would encourage us to reflect on our story—what has God done for me? And then be willing to share that story—here, or “across the lake” with our friends, neighbors, schoolmates (etc).

As we share our stories with *each other*, we always benefit from being reminded that God is faithful—even if he does the unexpected.

Your Faithfulness, O Lord, is Sure (based on Psalm 145, which you heard)