

“The Other Side”
Mark 5: 1-15
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United Church of Gainesville

Our scripture passage today raises an obvious question, “Why did Jesus cross the Sea of Galilee?” The answer, of course, is “to get to the other side.” Despite the joke, the question is a good one, perhaps one of many that occur to us after this very strange story about demons in a graveyard and suicidal swine. Yet in spite of its strangeness, this story is one of my favorites from Mark, and I believe it is one of the richest in the gospel. Like a multifaceted gem, each way we turn this story offers a different view, a different lesson, a different image of Jesus and the life of faith to which he calls his followers. This morning I want to show you just a few of the angles in which I find power and wisdom: the political, the religious, and the personal.

Jesus’ crossing of the Sea of Galilee is an utterly political act. To understand this, we first have to understand a little first century Palestinian geography. The region where Jesus lives and ministers for the first four chapters of Mark is Galilee, just west of the sea which bears its name. While Galilee, like all of Israel, is under Roman authority during Jesus’ life, the region is still primarily peopled by Jews. To the east of the Sea of Galilee, where our story takes place, is a region called the Decapolis, the Ten Cities. As their Greek name suggests, this region was settled by Alexander the Great’s troops when they conquered the area, and when the Romans took over, the Decapolis remained a bastion for the Gentiles, or non-Jews. In other words, when Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee, he is crossing into a kind of enemy territory.

Mark is keenly aware of this fact. It is notable that as soon as Jesus declares to his disciples that they should go to the other side, a huge storm rolls in. For each of our readings this morning, going over to the other side means troubling the waters and rocking the boat. Mark plays up the danger inherent in Jesus’ trip by describing in great detail the man whom Jesus is to cure, or rather, by describing his unclean spirit. This spirit is a thing of great power and great violence, able to break all of the shackles and chains that the people of the area have used to confine him, incapable of being restrained. This spirit is destructive, not only of the things around it but even of itself, “bruising himself with stones” night and day. And as Mark tells us in his biggest clue to the political nature of the story, this spirit has a name:

Legion. Now maybe it’s a coincidence that of all the words he knew, all the names he could have chosen, Mark just happened to pick the word for the basic unit of the Roman army, just happened to describe this demon as legion. Maybe he wasn’t very creative and a Roman legion just happened to be marching outside his door at the time he was writing, so he put down the first thing he saw. “What’s your name? Chair! No, Legion!” Maybe he just needed a word that suggested many people and he couldn’t come up with crowd, mob, throng, mass, multitude, swarm, horde, or pack. Maybe it was a coincidence that the Tenth Legion of Rome had been stationed in Gerasa since the year 6 and that the symbol of their Legion happened to be the boar, or wild pig. Maybe.

But as Sandy pointed out last week, from the first words of his gospel Mark and Jesus are challenging Roman authority, rejecting the claim that Caesar is the Son of God. In today's passage Mark's Jesus addresses another line of Roman propaganda, that the Roman army and Roman militarism brought safety and security to the empire. This was the claim they made as they conquered, but the actions of the Legion in our story suggest that, despite the promise of law and order, those who lived under Roman authority knew those legions for their destructive and maniacal power. As even the Roman Senator Tacitus put it, "the Romans brought devastation, but they called it peace."

Taken from a political point of view, the story of the Gerasene demoniac shows Jesus crossing into enemy territory and an entire Roman Legion bowing down before him. This is a powerful message from Mark about who is in charge and where true power lies. It shows Jesus casting out the demonic force which destroys its surroundings and even its host. In place of this devastation, Jesus leaves true peace and a return to reason. Such a reading is certainly in Mark's mind as he writes this story, and such a reading asks something of us as people of faith. When gives his disciples authority to cast out demons, and as those who seek to follow Jesus, I believe we must take on that same authority and responsibility to identify the evil forces which wreak havoc in our communities and in our world, to cast out the demonic spirits which cannot or will not be restrained; to expose those who hide behind a banner of security or peace but whose agenda is devastation and war; to turn things aright, and to leave in our wake a trail of peaceful communities, clothed and in their right minds. That is the political reading of Mark 5.

But Jesus is not content simply to shake up the world of international politics. Jesus' journey to the other side is also a religious act. The power of that act is already being set up in the chapters which precede our story. At the end of Mark 3, Jesus' family shows up outside the place where he is teaching and asks to see him. But Jesus tells those who come to get him that he is with his family already. Those who do the will of God are his family. Now this always seems a little harsh to me, but I believe the point that Jesus is trying to make is the point that Sandy was making in her sermon last week, it is a point about what it means to be a disciple.

In the Jewish religion, to which Jesus' audience on this side of the sea belonged, people were part of the faith by birth, simply by being born into a Jewish family, one became Jewish, but Jesus has a different idea about faith and discipleship. For him it is not about who one is but about how one lives. As the Messiah, Jesus' audience would have understood him symbolically as the green shoot out of the stump of Jesse, the continuation of the family tree of King David. But Jesus uses a different plant metaphor for his ministry. Right after he redefines his family, Jesus says the kingdom of God is not that family tree to which people are either born or not; the kingdom of God is like scattering seed willy-nilly on the ground, not taking any care where it lands, only caring how it grows. That scattering is the new vision of what the Messiah is there to do, and after telling this story, Jesus heads over to the other side to prove it. Jesus goes to a place where the family tree does not grow; he goes to scatter some seed.

From a Jewish perspective, the situation on the other side is almost comically bad. Jewish law places a lot of emphasis on cleanliness; cleanliness was literally next to Godliness, and to be unclean meant that you could not participate in any aspect of

community or religious life. Yet the scene into which Jesus arrives as he steps off his boat is laughably unclean. To begin with, the man is a Gentile, meaning he doesn't observe any of the practices which could make him clean, plus he has an unclean spirit which is by definition, unclean. One guesses the man is literally unclean, never washing. Plus he has been hitting himself with stones, which is likely to draw blood, which would also be unclean. One who even touches a grave is unclean for seven days, but this man lives in a graveyard. Oh, and that graveyard is surrounded by fields of pigs, which you may know, are not kosher. Jesus has arrived in the most unclean place imaginable, a combination cemetery/ hog farm- a Swine-metary- and he is faced with the most unclean man imaginable, this dirty demoniac. What Jesus should do is to turn around and get back in his boat and go back to the first side, back to the clean side, back to his own side. But Jesus stays on "the other side" and heals the man. And he doesn't just heal him. You may remember that throughout the book Mark's Jesus doesn't want anyone to know about who he is or what he does. But after Jesus heals this unclean Gerasene, he tells the man to go out and tell his friends what has happened. The Gerasene Demoniac becomes Jesus' first authorized biographer.

In the religious reading of this story we see Jesus once again widening the circle, making room for people who had been on the outside. Not only is God's kingdom not a narrow family tree, not only is goodness not about your identity but about God's action, not only is Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, he has called the worst of the worst as his witness. In answer to the question "who are mother and my brothers and my sisters," Jesus responds, the Gentile demoniac- who lives down by the tombs with the pigs- he is my mother, and my brother, and my sister. The person you think least deserves to be a part of the kingdom of God, is chosen as its messenger. This is the religious message of Mark 5.

And if we turn the passage a final time to look at it from a different angle, we understand the personal power in this story of exorcism and healing. As modern readers tried to make sense of the stories of demon possession throughout Mark, some have theorized that so-called demon possession was the way in which ancient audiences understood what we now call mental illness. By this reading the man in Gerasa is not a demoniac but rather someone who has been demonized for his disease. The shackles and chains which lie strewn about the hillside are an uncomfortable reminder of the way that people with mental illnesses have been treated in our own recent past and even today. And while the treatment of these diseases has progressed leaps and bounds over the last century, one reality is the same in Gerasa as in Gainesville-the extreme isolation that those with mental illness often face.

In a personal reading of this story, Jesus crosses a stormy Sea of Galilee, moves into enemy territory, and becomes ritually unclean, not to prove his own power, not to make a political point, not to cause religious upheaval, but to show his love for one lonely, suffering man. Faced with someone who has become almost animal-like because of the abuse and neglect of his community, Jesus shows compassion. The man, of whom the whole town is terrified, seems afraid himself, begging Jesus not to torment, or in other translations "torture," him. Perhaps this is what he has come to expect of those who visit the graveyard to get a look at the Demon-Man of Gerasa. But Jesus does not torture him. Instead he asks the man's name. And perhaps already in that humanizing gesture, the healing has begun. To be asked one's name is to be

acknowledged, to be cared for, to be brought into relationship. And relationship is so important.

This morning, UCG members Joan and Bruce Stevens, are offering a seminar on mental illnesses about the ways in which even caring communities can leave out those who have a diagnosis of mental illness. Bruce's description of that seminar says that rebuilding the lives and ending the isolation for our mentally ill neighbors "is the next big thing in human rights and social justice." This week the truth of that statement was brought home to our community in a very real way at the hearing of UCG member, Sam Harris. Those of us who know Sam, may or may not have ever guessed that he struggled with any kind of mental illness. Around here, he is known as a great tenor, a master gardener, and someone who is always available to help out. At his trial this week, UCG members testified to the positive impact he has had on our community, and Sam testified to the positive impact of UCG in his own life. For the first time in his career, the judge ordered that when Sam is released he return to being a part of a supportive church community like this one. Sam and I laughed this week at his being ordered to do something he loves so well.

When Jesus heals the Gerasene man he too sends him back to his friends and family with a message about what it means to show love and mercy, about what God has done and is doing, for all people, but especially for the lonely, the forgotten, the abused. Why did Jesus cross the Sea of Galilee? It depends who you ask, but no matter how one reads this passage, it is a story of transformation, of revolution, of a world made new by the love of God. Jesus crosses over, and armies lay down their weapons; he crosses over and the religious insider worships beside the outcast; he crosses over and the circle of care and concern in our own community is widened. Jesus crosses over, and neither Gerasa, nor Galilee, nor even Gainesville can be the same. Jesus crosses over for love, and thanks be to God. Amen.