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**INTERVENTIONS: 1. A Change of Heart, Not of Scenery**

Luke 8:23-39 Galatians 3:26-39

We tend to think of following Jesus as leaving behind the familiar for the unfamiliar. But sometimes, like the demon-possessed man in Luke 8, the harder call is to go back home.

Too dangerous to live among people, the man lived in the cemetery, which was thought to be the home and haunt of demons. His torment was so severe that the villagers kept him chained and shackled in a cave; perhaps to protect themselves from him, perhaps to protect him from himself, for night and day he cried out and gashed himself with rocks. Sometimes he snapped his chains and ran free.

As the man confronts Jesus, the demons know who Jesus is and of what he is capable, and they beg Jesus to send them into the heard of pigs instead of back into the abyss. Jesus agrees, the demons enter the pigs, and they rush over a cliff into a lake where they drown. The man so grateful to Jesus for his release from his torment, that he wants to stay with Jesus, to move on with him. The man asks Jesus to let him go with him.

Did he ask that of Jesus because he was so appreciative or…did he not want to go back home?

Did he just want to move on from his sordid and messy past?

We don’t know. Whatever the reason, Jesus told him “No.”

“No, return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.”

The man obeys Jesus, going throughout the village telling what Jesus had done for him.

The man could not free himself from the demons. As much as he wanted it, for as long as he’d wanted it, he could not free himself. But Jesus CAN and DOES cast out the demons;

Jesus CAN set US free from our demons, our addictions, our shame, our disappointments.

Becoming free from our demons is not a “do-it-yourself” project. We need help.

We need God’s help, and we need the help of other people.

**Return HOME? Return HOME? I don’t want to go back home, Lord, I want to go with you!**

To go back home was to go back to the people who knew him best and saw him at his worst. Home for him was not a warm and sentimental place. Home was place of memories so dark and pain-filled that he’d rather escape them and never go back. Sometimes following Jesus means being sent back to the place where we once knew pain and despair; the place where we disappointed people or they, us. Thoughts of going home conjures up fears of our old demons and the people who knew us best and saw us at our worst back then. But it precisely there that God’s grace in our lives will shine the brightest and do the most good.

It would be easier for the healed man to put his past behind him and head out with Jesus to new places far from the confused and tormented life he once lived before his community. But Jesus knew better what was best for the man. Jesus gave the man a new life but not a new location.  *He granted the man a change of heart but not a change of scenery.*

Jesus intervenes in our lives to help us and heal us, to make us whole, but he does not always take us out of our difficult situations and circumstances. Nor does he erase the consequences of our actions. Instead Jesus empowers us to face our circumstances, to face our failures and painful memories, so that we may transform them by his help. To leave is easy; but to return home is redemptive, both to you and to your village. It is our changed lives once we return home that enables others to know what God is like and trust what God can do in our lives.

God’s grace and protection extend to those haunting places we want to escape. If God can break Satan’s hold on us and set us free, then he can redeem the dark places of our former life and make them shining witnesses to God’s grace.

**You realize, don’t you, that in this story it is the townspeople who have the problem?** Not all of them are happy over the healing of the demoniac. They didn’t want him back! Nor did they want Jesus to stay around. When word of his exorcism spread, folks gathered at the hillside, and when they see the man, they are afraid. Previously, they knew the power of the spirits possessing the man and knew how to control them. Fred Craddock wonders if dealing with the demons kept the people busy and allowed them to keep the attention on the man and off their own lives and their own issues. But now God’s power for good had come to their village and disturbed their way of life. The villagers didn’t want any more trouble – they’d been terrorized for years by this demoniac, and now here was someone even more powerful! They knew the demoniac – they didn’t know this man Jesus and he was more powerful than the demons! Whatever witchcraft Jesus possessed, they didn’t want it around there, so go, go far away from them! Jesus was beyond their control and even when it is for good, power that you can’t control or manage is frightening, threatening.

The villagers sensed that there would be no denying their own issues in the presence of this man Jesus. Jesus’ healing of this man revealed God’s mysterious power – but they could not make a place for it or accommodate it in their lives. (Craddock in Hartman, 16)

Besides, in exercising his power over the demons, Jesus had destroyed their herd of pigs; they’d lost their income, this is hurting their economy. When they considered the cost of following Jesus, they decided it was too much, and verse 37 says, *“They asked Jesus to depart from them; for they were gripped with great fear; and Jesus got in the boat and returned.”*

**Miracles are messy.**  Goodness results, but change disrupts our careful lives, destroying pigs and property, changing our ideas about the way the world should be. Miracles remind us that we can’t control God and that God is quite prone to intervene and do the unexpected.

We like to be in control, and we like to know what to expect.

We like to keep our personal demons secret and under control.

We like to keep our pigs in order.

We don’t want our routine disturbed.

Most of the time we don’t want a miracle.

A miracle might change us, a miracle might make us think new thoughts in new ways.

We don’t want the challenges Jesus puts before us.

If Jesus says “you must give up this habit, you must change your life…”

If Jesus says, “If you are a Christian you can’t treat your employees like that…”

If he says, “If you are a Christian, you must forgive and move on…and let others move on,”

we are liable to say, “Go away and leave me in peace!”

YES, Jesus *heals us* and *sets us free,*

BUT he also c*harges us* to go back home and make things different.

**That’s a challenge for us: what are we willing to sacrifice to allow someone back into our village?** When they’ve wronged us, or hurt us, or neglected us, when we’re estranged from one another, when they are a pain to deal with, how do we respond? If their background troubles us, if their ideas challenge us, if their style grates us, what do we do? Bringing people back into the community costs us something and forces us to adjust.

We know that our neighbors, our children, our friends, need to be restored. But do we really want them to be, given the cost? Or do we push Jesus out, just like the villagers in our story?

It is much easier for the church when accept people just like us. As one preacher observes, “We’re okay with bringing people in, if they add to our value, but it is dangerous, and we feel threatened by those who may prove to be an economic or emotional or theological burden. But Jesus keeps bringing people in and asking us to pay even for the wounds that we didn’t create. Will we see the grace and power of restoration right in front of our faces, or will it cost too much? How many of our pigs are we willing to let run off the cliff?” (Covenant, 3)

In my former pastorate, our choir director was arrested, convicted, and sent to prison for selling drugs at the local high school. That was embarrassing to our church, but it was traumatic for his family. After his prison term and a spiritual rebirth through Chuck Colson’s prison ministry, he returned to our church family, a humbled and repentant man. His testimony to what God had done in his life was amazing, and after a thorough examination by our Session, we hired him back as our choir director. He gave his testimony before the congregation and sang to God “What a Difference You’ve Made in My Life.” After worship one of our church gossips said scornfully, “Well! That took a lot of nerve!” I looked at her and said, “No, that took humility and courage!” He served beautifully and powerfully as choir director until just recently, witnessing God’s power to cast out demons and give back one’s life!

Haven’t you found in your life that if we are brave enough to let the outcasts in, the one whose wounds we’d rather not deal with, whose pain we’d rather not get too close to, this is the one through whom God speaks? The outcasts are often God’s best witnesses. The person you’d rather keep at a distance, the person whose friendship you know would come at a cost, the people whose inclusion feels like a cost that may be a little too high for us to bear – it is the poor, and the damaged, the sick, the rejected who witness best God’s love and renewal.

And it is in our own brokenness, poverty, sickness, and rejection that we are called to witness Christ even to those who kept us at a distance. We can’t hide from our own past, our own exiles, or from the people who know us best and have seen us at our worst any more than the man in our story could. We are called to the uncomfortable and costly business of knowing and being known by each other.

My years in ministry and my twenty years here at Trinity have taught me that church is not the place to look for easy answers or to escape from pain. It’s not the place to come for a fairy-godmother or the secret to success. Church is messy and vulnerable, costly and uncomfortable. And that’s okay. In fact, this is the good news of the gospel, because Jesus meets us right here in the mess. It is in the mess that God is at work; casting out demons and bringing new life, new hope, new aims, new goals, a new sense of direction for your life!

I thank God that Trinity has a heart for service to community, that Trinity willingly gives and serves to meet the needs of people in need of restoration among and around us. May we welcome back in those who’ve been cast out, and may we hear through them the voice of God.

Amen!

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