

“Going to the Outcasts”

Luke 8:26-39

One of the most common critiques of the church is that it doesn't look like the people Jesus spent time with. Throughout his ministry, Jesus didn't spend much time with those who looked like nice respectable members of society. Instead, he spent time with the outcasts. He dined with tax collectors and sinners. He went to the sick and the injured, the blind and the lame. He went to the people who no one else would go to.

Today we heard the story of Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee to heal the Gerasene demoniac. No one would normally have crossed all of the barriers that Jesus did in that story; the Sea of Galilee, the cultural barriers of a Jew entering a Gentile region, leaving civilization to travel into the wilderness, to the graveyard, but that's what Jesus did. He went to those who were outcasts and brought them back into the fold.

Let's just take a look at all that Jesus does here. First, he crossed the Sea of Galilee and calmed a storm. The disciples are amazed that Jesus can control the wind and the waves.

Crossing the Sea of Galilee means that Jesus and his disciples are not in Galilee anymore. They're not in the place they should be. Jesus has crossed geographic, ethnic, and religious boundaries. This is not where a good Jewish rabbi would want to be. It's a place that is outside of normal experience.

Once they land, they get the kind of greeting that should make them want to get back on the boat and turn around immediately. They meet a man possessed by demons, who has been naked for years, homeless for years, and an outcast for years. Others had tried to bind him and chain him so he wouldn't be a danger to himself or others, but his supernatural strength kept that from working. He was driven out into the

desert, out into the wilderness, out into the places far from others. He's out in the graveyard, among the tombs, with others who are dead and gone, seemingly far from God. Jesus has gone to an unclean land to meet a man possessed by unclean spirits in an unclean place.

Yet instead of running away, Jesus goes to him. Even when told the man is occupied by a legion of demons, a number that could be as high as 6000, Jesus doesn't back down. He came to find this man and set him free. And that's what he does. He drives the demons out, and restores the man to himself.

Jesus doesn't just drive the demons out of the man. Instead, he sends them into a herd of pigs. Which shows us a couple of things. First, the pigs are a sign that this is not in a good clean Jewish place, either. Pigs were unclean, and aside from this story, the only other time pigs are mentioned in the Gospels is when the prodigal son is so far down on his luck that he's reduced to caring for pigs and wanting to eat their food. Second, what happens after Jesus lets the demons go into the herd of pigs shows that the demons are truly gone. They have left, and can never return. Jesus came to this outcast and cast out demons and changed his life forever.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus meets with outcasts, but doesn't leave them the way they were. He changes them. Zacchaeus promises to stop using his tax collecting business to cheat and steal, and pays back what was owed. Jesus tells the woman accused of adultery that he doesn't condemn her, but that she should go and sin no more. And the man who was possessed by a legion of demons, naked and wild, was now calmly sitting at the feet of Jesus.

The man freed from the demons remains an outcast, in a sense. Even though he's been freed, he's been changed; it's hard for his neighbors to see him as he's been changed. Their reaction isn't one full of joy and celebration. They instead are afraid, and send Jesus away.

The man is left in his own community. He could go reinvent himself as a disciple, somewhere new. But they wouldn't know his story. They wouldn't know who he had been. They'd only see the "after" picture, without the "before." You can see why he would like to go. It's just as easy to see why Jesus would tell him to stay. While his community was reacting in fear now, they needed some time for the initial shock to dissipate.

Once outcasts encounter Jesus, their lives are never the same. The paralytic whose friends lower him through the roof takes up his mat and walks away, off to a full life now that he can walk. The lepers that Jesus cleanses are able to be return to their families and their villages and resume a normal life. Even the Samaritan woman at the well seems to be able to be a part of the village again, no longer an outcast who has to go to the well when no one else is around. They then share the good news of how their lives have been changed by Jesus.

The witness of someone from inside a community is much more powerful than the witness of someone from outside. The witness of how Jesus had crossed barriers, ended separations, gone to the outcasts and brought them back, had the power to change lives.

The greatest barrier that Jesus crossed was the barrier between God and humanity. As God, Jesus is all-powerful, all knowing, present everywhere, immortal. If we tried to measure up to God, be like God on our own, we'd only end up looking like failures and feeling like outcasts. But as Paul wrote to the Philippians, Jesus "emptied himself, by taking the form of a

servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Jesus crossed the barrier between God and humanity to come and teach us about a God we could never understand or know on our own. He became weak, limited to one place at a time, mortal. Then Jesus crossed the barrier between life and death to defeat death once and for all.

One of the most overlooked passages in the creed that we say almost every Sunday is that Jesus descended into hell. One of my theology professors in college, after studying Martin Luther, said that it meant that there is nowhere we can go where Jesus is not Lord too. "It means this," said Luther, "that there is no place I might ever go, no depth to which I might sink, but that even there, he is Lord for me."

Jesus is Lord. Jesus showed he is Lord of the wind and waves when the disciples were in the boat when the storm came up. Jesus showed he is Lord when he drove the demons out. And Jesus showed he is Lord when he went to the cross to defeat the devil and the demons once and for all. He went to defeat the powers that try to make us outcasts, and separate us from God.

Because of that, because we know Jesus is Lord, because we know Jesus is more powerful than anything we face, we don't need to be afraid. The separation from God caused by sin has been ended. There is nowhere we can go that is too far from God. There is nothing we can do that will keep us too far from God. We are no longer outcasts. Instead, we have been made a part of God's family. What a wonderful promise to proclaim and share!

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