

“Don’t Get Too Close”

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BASED ON THE THEME, “EXPLORING CHRIST’S MISSION”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

June 20, 2010

Luke 8:26-39

²⁶Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸When 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”— ²⁹for Jesus 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.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

³²Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³Then 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. ³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

³⁵Then 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. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus 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.

OK, so here’s a test case for our theory that we welcome anyone, no matter who they are or where they are on their journey. How well would we have received the Gerasene demoniac? I mean, of course, after the exorcism by Jesus, not before. There is a limit, isn’t there?

Imagine if you will, in the words of Rod Serling, a man comes into our midst who is like this man. Even if he no longer stalks the local graveyard buck naked screaming at people who walk by and his own inner demons, I can’t imagine that his experience, even if healed, hasn’t marked him some. You know how it is when you come into

contact with someone you know isn't quite right?

This past week we were minding our own business sitting at the beach, late in the afternoon, winding down – just relaxing. Up walks a young man with a dog and he says, “mind if I let my dog loose so he can run?” and without waiting for our response unhooks him and the dog starts bounding around. He follows that comment with a joking statement, “don't worry, I'm not a serial killer, I just used to be one.” Then the man starts a monologue claiming to be a soldier just back from Afghanistan, having been shot in the ankle [and he had the scar to support his story]. He made reference to being a sniper, but he was trained and a college graduate in business in finance. He was all over the place in his never ending monologue. I listened as graciously as I could on the outside chance it was all true or at least some of it was, but frankly all I could think was, this guy is nuts and how can I get out of here asap?

Flash forward a few days and I am at church Wednesday morning and a man who evidently sought the shelter of our covered walkway during the storms the night before was stretched out arguing with himself in a loud voice for about three hours just outside the double doors in front of the nursery sidewalk. Finally, we had to ask JSO to come encourage the man to leave as it just did not seem safe to leave the building with this man around.

I thought about both these encounters as I read this story of this Gerasene “demoniac.” Would I have

been willing to welcome any of these three into our midst? Would it have been a challenge to have them around? Oh, yes it would. If the Gerasene demoniac, the sidewalk shouter or the supposed Army sniper/ business and finance major/ dog walker came around I know I would be thinking, “don't get too close.” But you know what? There are a lot of people who think the same thing about the other major character in this passage of Scripture. There are a lot of us who say to Jesus every day, “Don't get too close!”

When we look at the story Luke tells about this demoniac there are a lot of ways he tells us just how desperate this man was. First off, Jesus is in non-Jewish territory so he is already out-of-bounds with the rule-keepers and regulation – setters of his religion. He is already pushing the boundaries. Then his first encounter is with one of the worst possible cases. The man is demon-possessed – strike one. He is hanging out in cemeteries – unclean territory for sure according to the rules of Jesus' religion, strike two. And the man was naked – another no-no both at the general social level and certainly a no-no for good religious folks: strike three.

When Jesus asks this man's name it isn't just to get a friendly introduction. In Jesus' world if you knew someone's name it meant you had power over them. This demon possessed man already knew Jesus name – and he acknowledged Jesus' power – Son of the Most High God! Jesus is in a battle of supernatural powers with this man. And

he isn't just dealing with a simple case of anti-social behavior in an otherwise normal guy. This man isn't dealing with one or two issues that a little therapy and a few psycho-pharmaceuticals will cure. This man's name is Legion! He has a busload of demons twisting his hardwiring. Ironically, it is also the name used to describe the powerful Roman army. What that might tell us in this day and age has been lost in translation, but this is a tough case.

The demons tell Jesus that they are many and then recognizing his superior power they ask him not to torment them. They beg him not to send them into "the abyss," evidently a word representing utter destruction. Ironically there are pigs in the area, another code-word telling us this was an unclean, dangerous area, as if we needed any other reminders. Jesus gives the destructive powers leave and their spirit seems to spook the pigs into leaping off the bank into the lake below and drowning. This of course is where every father got the inspiration to ask his kids, "if all your friends were jumping off a cliff, would you jump too?"

Well, there are consequences from such things. This wasn't a herd of wild pigs. This was someone's livelihood and his reaction is to run tell the people about this Jesus who, to them, is scarier than the village demoniac who screams at them from the cemetery all day long. They beg Jesus to leave them and not torment them. He has harmed the economic welfare of their village. He has altered the social dynamic of their neighborhood. He has

done something so out of the ordinary, so miraculous that it defies explanation or understanding. What else might he do to upset the status quo, beset by illness, evil, and religious heresy as it might be? Who is more scary, Jesus or the Gerasene demoniac? Most of us probably wouldn't want either one to get too close.

Another problem we may have is with the whole miracle /exorcism. But the truth is that would not be hang-up for the people of Jesus' day as such. They believed in miracles and in magic. Wonder workers and miracle-doers were common, actually. We, of course, in our day and age don't because we are so scientific and reasonable. Please ignore the popularity of shows like "Touched By an Angel," and the whole "Harry Potter" business. We are sophisticated people and this miracle/magic stuff is just too much to believe in. But whether you do or don't doesn't really matter. The miracle and the magic is never the point of these stories in the Gospels. Oh, it is trying to say Jesus is just as able to do these things as all the other "wonder-workers" of that time. But the Gospels always point beyond the miracle to something more. In fact, in John, he calls them signs, which means they point to something beyond themselves.

Now, sometimes they point to Jesus and tell us something about him. Sometimes they point to the reaction of the crowd and sometimes they point to the reaction of the person who is healed or raised or saved in some other way. Here we can certainly say that all three

are in play. The story, the miracle-sign tells us some things about Jesus, but it also points us toward the reaction of the crowd and the response of the formerly possessed man. Each is instructive. Which one do you identify with?

This story tells us Jesus is more powerful than the demonic. He is able and willing to use his power to bring healing, even to those who others would abandon, reject, ignore, or fear. Jesus is so powerful even the evil powers themselves recognize his power and obey him. They do not want him to get too close because he will surely send them to the abyss, to their destruction. Certainly anyone who is under the power of the Legion of demons that pervade our culture today don't want Jesus to get too close.

The crowd is fearful of the power of this Jesus more so than the power of the demoniac they know. They fear the way he will change their lives, their reality, their world. They would rather live in the world as it is, or the world they believe in, than the world as God intends it to be. How many of us would fall into that category? How many of us would or have begged Jesus to leave us and go away? How many of us don't want Jesus to get too close?

Then there is the man himself. With all of his Legion of demons in control he does not want Jesus to get too close. But once he is set free from the demonic, once he is restored to the reality that God intends he wants nothing more than to go with Jesus. He wants to get as close to Jesus as possible, but Jesus sends him out on a

mission. What mission? Proclaim what God has done for you!

Whichever one of these characters we identify with, we better check our lifestyles. Are we talking a good Jesus game while doing everything we can to keep him from coming too close? We men, on this Fathers' Day let's confess it: we have a hard time with intimacy. Oh, we want physical intimacy, but spiritual and emotional intimacy are frightening. We don't want anyone to get too close, especially Jesus. Or maybe we are in the crowd. We like to see miracles, especially if they involve the lottery, but letting Jesus take control of our lives? Don't get too close Jesus. It might change too much.

If we relate to this Gerasene demoniac, this Legion-possessed mess of humanity then we have every reason to fear Jesus getting too close. Especially if we really don't want to be changed, we will not want Jesus too close. But any encounter with Jesus will change you. Any time you open up your life to the Son of the Most High God there is a chance everything will get changed. And when it does you can't help but go out declaring how much God has done for you.