

Reflection for Sunday, June 19, 2022

“All Our Relations”

We sing of God’s Good News lived out, a church with purpose: faith nurtured and hearts comforted, gifts shared for the good of all, resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize, fierce love in the face of violence, human dignity defended, members of a community held and inspired by God, corrected and comforted, instrument of the loving Spirit of Christ, creation’s mending. We sing of God’s mission.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, ruler of all things seen and unseen, through your Son, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, you show your power and mercy. You cast out evil, tear down walls of division, comfort and challenge your people, and show signs of your kingdom coming into the world. Grant that we may lift up the discouraged, strengthen the doubting, and join with all who seek to thank you for your goodness. Glory be to you, O God, who, with the Holy Spirit and the Holy Son, together is worshipped and praised; One God forever. Amen.

From the territory of the city of Gerasa, is a man from the town who was possessed by demons. “His condition was one of melancholy associated with extreme antisocial and suicidal frenzy. This deranged man had fled from home and human society and found a ghoulish pleasure in living among the rock-hewn graves on the hillside. Night and day he cried out and gashed himself with stones. He was clearly disturbed, for it was considered to be a sign of madness when anyone spent the night in a place of graves” (Cleophus J. LaRue). This man was driven out of the village, wore no clothes, and was homeless, living in the tombs of the dead.

The Gerasene location had great historical significance. During the First Jewish War it was the site of a Jewish revolt in which the Roman general Lucius Annius massacred one thousand rebels and destroyed Gerasa and all of the villages around it.

Perhaps this man was suffering from “moral injury”, the result of trauma caused by oppression which can manifest as alienation from family and friends, social instability, withdrawal, self-harming. Perhaps this is why the demons driving the man are called “Legion,” which is the title for a division of about five thousand Roman soldiers. Perhaps this name reflects the effects of imperial Rome’s brutal colonial exploitation.

But when he saw Jesus he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his lungs, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” It was in his encounter with the sovereign Lord that his life was changed forever.

In this story, it is not entirely clear how Jesus cast out all of the demons that led to the living death for this man. What is clear is that the love of God incarnate in Jesus had the power to heal the man. Jesus intervened and took a proactive stance on behalf of this troubled individual. Still uncertain of what to do with his newly restored life, the man begged Jesus to let him go with him.

We are not sure why he wanted to follow Jesus. Maybe it was out of a sense of deep appreciation, or the thrill of a new challenge, or simply a desire to move on from a sordid and messy past. Whatever the reason, Jesus said no. “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Return home! Return to the people who know you best and saw you at your worst.

Jesus intervenes in our lives to bring wholeness and completeness. However, his intervention does not always lift us out of difficult situations but instead empowers us to live with faithfulness and conviction in the midst of the ordinary and the familiar; in the midst of past failures and painful memories, in order that we may transform them with the promised aid and comfort of Jesus. To leave would be easy, but to return is both affirming and redemptive.

“Then the 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. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.”

Why were the villagers in our story fearful when they saw their neighbour in his right mind? One would expect instead that they would rejoice, since one of their own, who had been lost to them, was healed and coming home. They did not. Did they fear his healing might upset the status quo? Can we, can our churches, create gracious spaces where the wounded can come to be heard? Can we be honest about our own lives and the lives of others, while avoiding judgment? Can someone, like the man in our story, find healing through those willing to embody incarnational love? Can they find advocates willing to insist that our local, provincial, and federal governments provide funding for mental health services for survivors of abuse? Can the church help broker these conversations and welcome?

It was his change of heart, not change of scenery, that served as a powerful witness to the power of God to make whole again; to make what had been useless useful once again. It is our changed lives once we return home that serves as a potent witness to what God is like and what God can do *to* and *for* our lives.