

Sermon on 4PentecostC: Luke 8:26-39
Preached at St. Dymas, SD State Penitentiary, Sioux Falls
6-20-2007 by Pastor David Van Kley

Although I've visited jails and prisons many times over the years I've served as a pastor, only once did I *stay* in jail longer than I wanted. You know the routine: a visitor empties his pockets and walks through the metal detector; the guards lead him through several sets of self-locking doors to a visitation room. Well, one time, they forgot me. For ten minutes, I waved my hands in front of the TV cameras and hollered down the hallway, but nobody seemed to notice. The inmate, Tracy, a friend of mine, was in the cell with me and definitely saw the humor in my situation. Finally, someone on the other end of the camera noticed and they let me go.

A bit funny, maybe, but the story reveals a fundamental divide between us. I'm here as a visitor. I can walk out of here. But you cannot. All of us from Custer and Mitchell are here voluntarily: we can walk out of here, while you cannot. That's gone through my mind several times in the last few minutes. I suspect it goes through your minds every time someone comes to worship with you.

Still, it is not what *divides*, but what *unites* us that impresses me most. All of us are here tonight for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have come to hear good news, to taste good news, to share good news. This good news binds us together as brothers and sisters.

And other beliefs and experiences we hold in common have led us to this point. For example, we all believe in the power of evil. Not necessarily that we think of demon possession the same way Luke did. But we all know from experience that evil is powerful, that it can take over a person, so that he's really not himself. So that he's out of his mind—his *right* mind, anyway. We call these demons by different names. Addiction, rage, mental illness, jealousy. *Sin* is another name we apply to all kinds of demons. A power that takes us over and prompts us to do that which we later regret.

Today's gospel is about such a man. The man from the country of the Gerasenes is a prisoner in two ways. He struggles with so many demons that he calls himself "Legion," a word for a **battalion** of Roman soldiers. He was a prisoner of an internal war, held by an army of demons. He was also, *literally*, a prisoner. The authorities shackled him with chains and guarded him 24-7. He was considered a dangerous man. Still, no one could control him. Many times, he broke out of custody, headed straight for the cemetery and hid out among the tombs. Which is to say, he was as good as *dead*. He wore no clothes, because had no contact with people. His only companions were the unclean pigs. Worst of all, he was cut off from *God*, for when Jesus came along, he shouted, "what do you have to do with me, Son of the Most High God!" The answer, he thought, was *nothing*. Nothing at all.

Have you ever felt that way? As if God himself would have nothing to do with you? Cut off from the rest of the world, by fences of razor wire, walls of concrete, and

guards with weapons. Most people in South Dakota steer clear of this place, stay away from you. Perhaps you've even felt that you are living among the tombs. All because you weren't in your right mind once upon a time.

I mentioned my friend Tracy, who was my fishing buddy and our son's favorite schoolteacher. A great young guy, when he was in his right mind. But he was also captive to the demons of alcohol and drugs. One night, under the influence, he got his rifle from the basement, shot and killed one of his friends, and left another handicapped for life. The state of Michigan sent him away for a long time—24 to 40.

But those of us outside these prison walls also are out of our minds at times. I may not have done many things that are illegal, but I have done some. I just haven't been caught. And some of the legal things I've done and said and thought are every bit as evil as the crimes for which you are serving time. In a sense, *all* of us are prisoners, cut off from God and from community, by an invisible coil of razor wire. All people are.

It would seem hopeless, this situation we find ourselves in. And it would be, if Jesus didn't show up.

But Jesus *does* show up. In the country of the Gerasenes, among the tombs and the unclean pigs, for the sake of a crazy, dangerous, naked man. He speaks a word of healing that sends the demons running right out of the man and right out of the picture, drowning them under the waves of the sea. The next time we see this man, he is clothed and in his right mind. Such is the power of Jesus Christ.

A couple months after Tracy was in jail, the addiction to alcohol and drugs was broken and he was like a new man, restored to his right mind. Jesus showed up.

Here, at St. Dysmas church, Jesus shows up. You experience his healing touch, through word and sacrament and each other. You have contact with people on the outside, the very people from whom you feel most cut off. You are restored and transformed, as are we in your presence. Because Jesus shows up among us! Thanks be to God!

After the healing of this tortured man, you'd think everyone would rejoice! But did you notice how the people of the country of the Gerasenes reacted? We're they happy for him? No. They are *afraid*. Afraid of *him*, I suspect. Afraid he'd revert to his old ways. Afraid of *Jesus*, too, because he turns the world upside down just when people think they've got it all figured out. *So the Gerasenes ran Jesus right out of town!*

But isn't it often that way when people are released from prison? Society makes it tough to fit in. People are afraid of ex-cons. If you are deemed a sex offender, people can find out where you live with a click of their mouse. Even if you aren't, people have long memories. They are skeptical of God's power to change someone. They find it hard

to forgive.

Tippy was an ex-con who returned to his hometown after being paroled. He had served time for killing his wife in a marital dispute. Though he had been “free” for years, he had few acquaintances and no friends. People didn’t want anything to do with him. So after awhile, he didn’t want anything to do with them, either. It was almost as if he were still in prison, only that the big house had been replaced by his own little house.

Some of you will be released back into society. I think that we must be honest about the barriers you will face. People on the outside are filled with the demons of fear and suspicion. It will take courage and faith for you to endure. And a few good friends really helps. Which is why visits from outsiders like us is so important. Why the M2 program is so important. Why an innovative ministry like the Church on the Way in Rapid City, a church made up of people in the city jails, former prisoners, and allies from the community is so important. Even when we can’t see him, Jesus shows up.

Maybe that’s why the story ends the way it does. The tortured man wants to leave town. He wants to get away from those hostile Gerasenes and hang out with Jesus. But Jesus says, “I need you to stay *here*, at home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Which is exactly what the man proceeded to do.

I think that when we experience Christ’s power to transform us, we often think we should do something extraordinary, something totally different than before, join the peace corps, become a pastor or a missionary. But most of the time, Jesus says, return to your home and tell the story. Declare how much God has done for you.

Some of you are here for the long haul, perhaps even for the rest of your life. This is your *home*. Your mission field is *here*. You are called to share the word, invite people into Jesus’ love *here*. I know many of you have done this very thing. Jesus urges you to continue.

Some of you will be leaving here relatively soon. It will be tempting to have nothing to do with those who are afraid of you, who knew you at an unfortunate time in your life. But to the extent that the law allows, you are needed to tell the story of God’s liberating love, among those very people, by your words and deeds. Who better than you?

I want you to know, in closing, that it is a privilege to worship with you today. We have as much to learn from you as you have to learn from us. Truly, the only real difference between us is that we can walk out of here, while you cannot. Through baptism, there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female, inmate nor outsider, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.