

Sunday August 30, 2020
Lesson 13: Great Mercy
Scripture: Mark 5: 1-20

Context:

We conclude our series on community with a lesson in the Gospel of Mark. Once again, Jesus becomes the teacher and the healer simultaneously. He goes to the land of the Gerasenes and uses a healing to anoint a new missionary to tell of God's good news.

At first glance, this story appears rather simple and straightforward. Yet if we dive deeper, we see several aspects and perspectives worth examining. The text lends itself to several lessons to teach us about gratitude to Jesus for his healing powers in our lives.

Perhaps the biggest theme in this text is the amazing healing power of Jesus. In this case he is able to address a man who people say is possessed by a singular evil spirit. As Jesus discovers, the man is full of several demons who know Jesus is the "Son of the Most High God." They beg him not to torture them. Jesus acquiesces to both requests, yet makes it a twist by sending the demons back to their place: the primeval abyss, the depths of the sea.¹ Jesus shows them he will listen and also have his way as the final authority.

Another important element to the healing power of Jesus in this text is the placement where he finds himself. For the first time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus finds himself in the Gentile country, the territory of one of the Hellenistic towns of the Decapolis on the shore of Lake Tiberius.² Jesus is making a point about his ministry extending to different lands and different people; he is making strides in the inclusivity of the gospel.

There are some other additions to this story beyond Jesus having amazing healing power. A look at the word "legion" raises some examination at what the gospel writer wanted to convey. The word "legion" is a Latin term referring to an army unit of four to six thousand men.³ For Jesus, and for the gospel writer, to use this term was to make a political statement. Both Jesus's listeners and the gospel writer were subtly declaring Jesus had more power than the Roman forces of the day.

This interpretation also brings up interesting commentary on the crowd who hears what happens from angry pig owners. Could it be the people are upset about losing resources? Or could it be that people see the tormented man clean, hear about "legion" being driven out, and now can see there's a new sheriff in town? This Jesus could be trouble; he could mess up their world.

¹ Williamson, Lamar, Jr. "Mark," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for First and Second Kings*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 104.

² *Ibid.*, 104.

³ *Ibid.*, 105.

The conclusion has the healed man asking to go with Jesus. Instead, Jesus sends him to go to his own people and be a missionary. The Gentile region now has a preacher to tell them about the amazing power of Jesus.

Application

At first glance, many of the healing stories about Jesus focus on his amazing ability to physically cure people. A miracle worker always captures the attention of people and draws crowds. Whenever we read of Jesus healing, he catches the attention of someone as he is proclaimed the Son of the Most High God or some other title. People are convinced by his actions he is someone of a higher power.

Yet the healing stories also reveal other things about Jesus. In this case, Jesus does in fact heal a man plagued by many demons. He also makes a political statement, which causes the crowds to move from awe to terror as they realize his true identity. Jesus may be a healer and yet his healing symbolizes something which threatens the status quo and how the crowds see themselves.

It begs the question: do we really want to be healed by Jesus? If we are healed by Jesus, it might radically change our world. We might find ourselves unlike what we've previously known and we might even find we don't fit in with the crowd who stares at us like we've lost our minds.

In his book *Breathing Under Water*, spiritual director Richard Rohr contends Christians, particularly those in the western world, have sometimes avoided the true healing to come from Jesus. He states: "Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure, and security."⁴ His argument contends Christians are sometimes content with a faith where we are rewarded, but very little of the self is transformed. We don't want Jesus sticking his nose into the places where we are hurt or need healing.

It's the difference we see in how we talk about Jesus as well. Our liturgy and our words often label Jesus "our Lord and Savior." Yet when most people talk about Jesus, the Savior language emerges solely. Think of all the examples where Jesus as Savior is the primary means we have when we talk about Jesus: "I gave my life to Christ when I was thirteen and was saved. I feel close to Jesus when I sing my favorite hymn at church. Jesus is all about saving souls and is not about anything political."

While all those sentiments have their merits and we do indeed claim Jesus as our Savior, are we ready to say: "Jesus is my Lord?" That's when things start getting scary. Do we actually make Jesus our Lord when we choose to give all our money to the civic organizations to get in good with other groups and leave whatever is left over for the church, if anything? Do we make Jesus our Lord when we are given the choice of having a Sunday Funday doing whatever we want instead of showing up to worship God? Do we make Jesus our Lord when we choose to say our political party is the one Jesus would be in? Making Jesus our Lord should terrify us because it demands things of us to rock our world.

⁴ Rohr, Richard. *Breathing Under Water*, (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011), xxi.

We hear of two responses to being healed by Jesus in today's lesson. The first is fear and a request for Jesus to go away to another place. Just ask the crowd who saw him go down with the pigs. They could see Jesus meant business and that terrified them. Before we judge we might ask ourselves how we would respond when Jesus comes along and demands our time, our energy, our money, and our service.

The second response is hopefully the one we can emulate. The man with the evil spirits was healed and as a result, he began to testify to the power of our Lord with his life. He went around preaching and teaching so others might receive eternal life and healing. He lived a life of gratitude to the one who set him free.

What speaks to you in this passage from Mark? Who do you find yourself sympathizing with in the story: the crowds or the man with demons? What does Jesus as Savior mean to you? What does Jesus as Lord mean to you? How can you testify to how Jesus has healed and set you apart?

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