

“Tough Choices”

Luke 8:26-39

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Frankfort, Kentucky

June 29, 2016

This morning we turn our attention to one of the most perplexing events in the life of Jesus. Each time I read this passage, my head starts spinning with questions.

What is demon possession? Why did Jesus cast the demons that possessed this man into a nearby herd of pigs? Why did the people ask Jesus to leave their community? Why did Jesus not grant the healed man's request to follow him?

I am not going to have time to deal with all these questions to your satisfaction or mine, but I hope to begin a conversation that can continue on upcoming Wednesday nights. Let me begin by sharing the details of this story.

Jesus and his disciples were in Capernaum teaching and ministering to those who needed help. They decided to cross the Sea of Galilee and enter the Gentile region on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire known as the Decapolis. For the most part, these ten cities were located in modern day Jordan.

Soon after landing, Jesus was approached by a man who needed help. What do we know about this man?

He was from the city but was living among tombs in a cave. Evidently, he had been banished from town because of his bizarre, violent, dangerous behavior.

Words cannot describe how miserable he must have been. He was cut off from family and friends and any semblance of normalcy. Since he had been there a long time, there appeared to be no hope he would ever get better.

It was a common understanding in that culture that there was a 'spirit world' composed of 'beings' that were responsible for things that could not be explained naturally. Angels offered guidance and help while demons worked their destructive power in human experience.

Based upon what we know now about health, could it be the man living in a graveyard was mentally ill? I certainly think so. I believe it is entirely possible he was schizophrenic or struggled with multiple personalities, some of which were extremely violent and destructive.

I also believe this could have been the reason Luke highlighted this story in his gospel. Up to this point, Jesus healed people who were struggling with physical ailments. They were blind, deaf, lame, paralyzed or had leprosy.

This man had none of these conditions. Instead, his problem revolved around his behavior. This was such a mystery to his neighbors that the only diagnosis they could come up with was demon possession, a category reserved for all mystery illnesses.

Thankfully, Jesus treated him no differently from anyone else he encountered who was sick. He had compassion upon him and healed him.

This leads to our second question. Why did Jesus cast these 'demons of mental illnesses' into a nearby herd of pigs? Why did they react by running over a cliff where they drowned in a lake?

When Jesus healed someone with a physical problem, the change was obvious. Their sight was restored, or they were able to walk.

A cure for mental illness was another matter. How would the demoniac or his neighbors know if he was permanently healed? Too much was at risk not to know, which meant this man would probably not be allowed to return home.

When the demoniac and the town folk saw the pigs run over the cliff and drown, they knew this man had been cured. He could safely return to his family and resume the life he once knew.

The story concludes with two interesting discussions. First, the townspeople asked Jesus to leave their community. It appears they were afraid of losing more pigs.

Secondly, the man who had been healed requested permission to go with Jesus instead of going home. This is understandable. No one had been this good to him or done this much for him, and he wanted to follow Jesus out of gratitude and devotion.

However, Jesus told him to go home and tell others what God had done for him. I think I understand why. No testimony is more powerful than a changed life, and he needed to share with the people who had feared him so long what God had done for him through Jesus. If God loved him, a Gentile and demoniac, and responded to his plea for mercy, then God loved them, too, and would help them with their problems.

How does this story speak to us today? I pondered this question for some time last week.

To begin, it helps us to understand mental illness is as real as physical ailments and can be as debilitating. Thank goodness society is acknowledging this and addressing the needs of people struggling with anxiety, depression, phobias and a variety of crippling emotional disorders.

For too long, people have suffered in silence or been misunderstood if they talked about what was going on in their lives. The compassion Jesus showed the demoniac was no different from the attention he gave others who were suffering, and we should follow his example.

This story is a powerful reminder that every situation I face, regardless of how bleak it seems, can be made better if I reach out to God and others for help. I am alone only if I choose to be. Faith, family and friends can lift me out of the worst place I have ever been.

There is no shortage of fear, anxiety and disappointment in all of our lives. At times, we find ourselves where we never thought we would be and don't want to stay.

Sometimes this is due to the decisions we have made, and at other times it is beyond our control. Whatever the reason, the burden is heavy, and the pain is real.

What does our faith say about this? It tells us we are not alone, and there is no situation in life Christian hope cannot embrace and change for the better.

My Jewish friends tell me the only unforgivable sin is despair. Despair indicates hopelessness and hopelessness is to deny God. Who is to say what God can and cannot do? As Dr. John Claypool often said, "We don't know enough to be that negative. We don't know what will happen in the great not yet!"

What we do know is God loves us like responsible parents love their children, unconditionally and eternally. At all times and in all places, God is working behind the scenes to open doors of opportunity for us to pass through to a better life.

God will come where we are and grant us wisdom, understanding, strength, courage, confidence, patience and determination. He will take each step with us and guide us along our way. He will bring people into our lives who will be good role models and mentors. It is up to us, though, to open our lives, listen and begin that journey.

Just as Jesus met the Gerasenes demoniac at his lowest point, he will come to you and me. It is up to us to trust and follow him. I certainly hope you will.

I also hope you will remember those who helped you when you needed it most and follow their example when others need you.

There is another powerful lesson to be found in this story. **It reminds me that healing comes with a price, and for some people, the price is too high.**

This was true for many people in the community where the demon possessed man lived. Immediately after Jesus healed him, Jesus was asked to leave town because the people were “seized with great fear.”

Of what were they afraid? Luke doesn’t tell us, but wouldn’t you like to know? I sure would.

First they were afraid of the demoniac, and then they were afraid of Jesus. What and who were they not afraid of?

Perhaps they were afraid if Jesus stayed around a little longer, they would lose more pigs as other people would surely be brought to him to be healed. I doubt this man was the only one who was “demon possessed.” I suppose the price of caring for everybody was just too high.

It is a sad day when we choose pigs over people. The temptation to do this is strong, at times irresistibly strong. As believers, we must always choose people over pigs.

What does this mean? Personally, there are times we will be called upon to make sacrifices in order to help a family member or friend who is struggling with an illness. Helping them will require suspending our plans, changing our routine and reallocating our resources.

Wrestling with these tough choices will not be easy. Sustaining a high level of care will take a toll on us.

God understands and will provide the strength, stamina and wisdom we need to make wise decisions. Lean upon God and those God sends your way to help you. They are there to support you as you reach out to those you love.

I believe our text confronts churches with tough choices, too. If we are called to be the presence of Christ in our community, what does this mean?

What was important to Jesus? It is clear to me nothing was more important to him than people.

This may not have been true of many of the religious leaders of his day. Some of them seemed to be far more concerned about their own welfare than the well-being of the people they were called to serve. This was never the case for Jesus, though.

This is why he walked the dusty, Palestinian roads listening to people's stories so he could respond to them with grace and compassion. He went where the people were and met them on their turf. He sacrificed the comforts of home and the pursuit of a peaceful and prosperous life in order to touch and heal those who were struggling merely to survive.

How can we be the presence of Christ in our world and do any differently? I don't believe we can.

Individually, we must put the common good above our personal pursuits and collectively, we must use our time, talents and resources providing services people need to find health and wholeness.

I appreciate the way so many of you do this in your daily lives. I see your warm hearts and the many ways you reach out to people with encouraging words and kind deeds. In so many ways, you reflect the nature of God and make hope visible. Thank you for being the presence of Christ.

I continue to tell friends near and far about the Mission Frankfort Medical Clinic we have in our church, our clothes and toy closet, the Emma Quire Mission Center in Owsley County, the Singing Bridge Academy, The Center for Arts, the Impact Center, our association with the Men's Homeless Shelter and Soup Kitchen, the Care and Comfort Ministry and the work we support with our partners in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Kentucky and Nationally.

Truly, First Baptist values serving over being served, healing over hurting, sacrifice over self-indulgence, generosity over greed, love over hate, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge and peace over war.

Like Jesus, we are serious about confronting evil, righting wrong, lifting up the lowly, liberating the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, giving people a second chance and building bridges of goodwill, understanding, reconciliation and hope instead of erecting walls of suspicion and hate.

I am grateful to be a part of a church that is making hope visible as Jesus did. To me, this is the heart of ministry.

Our voice must be heard beyond our walls, though. We must use our influence to persuade civic and government leaders at all levels to put the welfare of people over the profits of pigs, which the people where this demon possessed man lived refused to do.

As followers of Jesus, we must leave no one behind in their cave of hopelessness and despair. We should never consider anyone less valuable than anything.

Instead of asking Jesus to leave their village that day, what if Jesus had been asked by the community leaders to stay and to help them with other problems they were facing. They could have picked his brain and had the finest training session on how to build healthy communities. But, they did not; they asked him to leave.

I wonder what we would have done had we been there?