

Healing Power

Luke 8:26-39

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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When I was in seminary, I spent one summer working at the Illinois state mental hospital near Chicago. It was a program called Clinical Pastoral Education, and was part of my seminary training. Over time I came to understand what a valuable experience it was; but at the time, it was challenging, extremely difficult, and for a while I hated it.

The way this particular program worked was that before we could put on our chaplain's badge, we had to spend a couple of weeks working as orderlies—mopping floors, cleaning up after the patients, that kind of thing. I was assigned to the infirmary ward, which meant that the patients had the double whammy of a physical ailment on top of their mental illness. The patients were there in the mental hospital for a variety of reasons—some were battling the demons of depression; some were paranoid schizophrenics, thinking that everyone was out to get them. One man believed he was God, and every time I walked past his bed, he would sit up and shout, "I'm God," then he'd start screaming profanities and tell me he was going to kill me.

The whole experience put me way outside my comfort zone. I was scared; I was uncomfortable; I'd never had any experience with people like this, and I wanted out of there.

The breakthrough came for me the day that I was helping the nurse change the sheets. We got to the bed of a man named Carl, when the nurse got a phone call, leaving me with Carl. Carl was a 54-year-old man, who lived his whole life in the institution, curled up in a fetal position, able to communicate only by various grunts and groans. Well, when the nurse left to go answer the phone, I figured this was a test from God. So I swallowed hard and decided it was up to me. There's an art to changing someone's sheets when that person is still in the bed. I did like I had seen the nurse do: I rolled Carl to one side, took off the dirty sheets and put on the clean ones, rolled him to the other side and finished the process. Then I folded a sheet the way I had seen her do it, to fashion a big bulky diaper to put on Carl. Anyway, that was the start of my relationship with Carl. After that, whenever I would walk past his bed, I would stop for a few minutes and speak to him. It was always a monologue, of course. I'd talk about the weather or the Chicago Cubs, and Carl would grunt. A couple of days after the sheet changing incident that began my friendship with Carl, I carried—literally carried—him into the room for the doctor to examine him. When I set Carl on the examining table, he was still curled in his fetal position. I started to step back from the table, and Carl started grunting, and I realized that he was scared that he might roll off the table. So I held him the whole time the doctor was examining him.

After my stint in the infirmary ward, I was reassigned to a different ward in another building on the sprawling hospital grounds. So I went by to tell Carl good-bye. I leaned over Carl's hospital bed with my hands dangling over the rails of the bed. As I talked, Carl reached up with his wrinkled little hand and held my hand. It was for me a genuine act of love, and I will never forget it. It was a transforming, healing moment for me.

Since my experience that summer, every time I read this story of the Gerasene demoniac, I think about the people I got to know at the mental hospital that summer, and especially about Carl. Still today we are not really sure what to do with people who have certain mental limitations, but back in Jesus' day, they knew even less. The only thing they knew was that the guy was crazy, a danger to himself and others, so they sent him away to live with the other dead people among the tombs. He may hurt himself, but at least he wouldn't be able to harm others.

I can imagine that from time to time the teenagers from the nearby town would dare one another to sneak into that graveyard and try to see if they could catch a glimpse of the crazy man.

We don't really know what drove him crazy. All the Bible tells us is that his demon was named Legion, "for many demons had entered him." It reminds me about some of the people I knew in the mental hospital. Most of the people were there, not because of one single traumatic event (as had been the case with Carl), but because of the cumulative effect of many things. It was a lifetime of stresses and burdens that kept pressing on them until they cracked.

I understand how this can happen. Sometimes at the end of the day, the burdens of that day are not from one big thing, but from the countless little things that build up and build up, almost to a breaking point. They seem to pile up so that there appears to be no way out from under them.

I wonder if that was the case with this man whose demons were legion. That day when Jesus arrived in the country of the Gerasenes, he stepped out of the boat, and immediately this crazy man ran out the tombs shouting. Jesus gently but firmly confronted the man and his legion of demons, and drove the demons out of the man. He sent the demons into a herd of pigs which immediately ran down the hill and jumped into the lake where they were drowned.

At this point the focus of the story shifts somewhat. The swineherds were pretty upset at this sudden turn of events. Before Jesus came along, the swineherds were making a living raising the pigs. But then Jesus came and healed the crazy man, but in the process cost these people a lot of money when their pigs jumped into the lake.

The Bible says that the people asked Jesus to leave because they were seized with great fear. Of course they asked Jesus to leave, because as Jesus always did wherever he went—and still does when he comes into people's lives—he upset things. I know that people say that if you let Jesus into your life, everything will be happiness and joy. But sometimes the path to that happiness and joy is an upsetting one. Jesus had cost the people something, and frankly they didn't like it; they didn't want Jesus around. They liked it better the way things used to be: when the crazy man was still crazy, running naked through the tombs, and they were raising their pigs. They didn't like it when Jesus came and upset their comfortable way of life—especially when it cost them something.

So at least one point that is made in this story is that the power of Jesus sometimes intrudes into our lives and upsets things. We're happy for Jesus to come into our lives as long as he doesn't mess things up too bad. But when Jesus starts upsetting our comfortable lives, then that's another thing entirely. Sometimes if we are to follow the way of Jesus and do what Jesus calls us to do, it's going to mean that we are going to have to make some sacrifices, and frankly, we've never really liked making sacrifices.

I think this principle comes into play in our lives in lots of situations. For example, you may be in a relationship with someone from whom you are estranged, when the relationship is broken, and the only thing that's going to heal the relationship is to forgive the other person. But that would mean giving up the old grudge that we are carrying.

I've told you before about the two old bachelor brothers who shared the same house, but that was about the extent of their relationship. One brother felt that the other had done something to hurt him years ago, and so for years he nursed a grudge against his brother. He suffered terribly from headaches, and the headaches got so bad that he went to the doctor to get some relief. The doctor was a pretty savvy guy; he knew about these brothers and about how they were estranged from each other. So he said to the one who came looking for some relief from the headaches that in his medical opinion there might be a connection between the headaches and the estrangement from his brother. The old man said, "You mean if I forgive my brother and reconcile with him, the headaches will go away?" The doctor said, "I think so." The old man said, "Then I'd rather have the headaches."

If we let Jesus into our lives, Jesus may well upset things, and call us to make some changes, and we don't do that very well.

Or here's another example: the environment. As Christians we know that this is God's world, and we have been given the responsibility to care for it. We all agree that clean air and clean water are good things, and no one wants to leave a polluted planet for our children. But we don't really want it bad enough to have to pay for it. We don't want it if it's going to cost us something. Sometimes doing the thing that Jesus expects of us calls for sacrifice, and we don't like making sacrifices.

So at least one point that this story of Jesus' healing the Gerasene demoniac makes is that sometimes Christ's way and the way we prefer can clash. And when that happens, which way will we choose?

I think this story makes another point as well. When Jesus drove the demons from this crazy man, he was doing much more than just making a sick person well. He did do that, and that's certainly a good thing. But there is something special about this healing—and about all of the healings of Jesus that are recorded in the Bible.

If you study the various healing stories, you see that Jesus didn't just roam around curing random people of their ailments. There are no stories of Jesus curing someone who had a head cold or the hiccups. The people that Jesus healed were people whose illnesses or infirmities were preventing them being included among the chosen people. Back in that day, Jewish laws laid out very clear limitations as to who was included and who was excluded. Anyone that the Old Testament laws declared as unclean were excluded, were not welcome among the chosen people. And on the list of the excluded were people like lepers, blind people, the lame, foreigners, sinners...and people who were possessed by demons. Do you see what's going on here? This crazy man—there was no way he could ever be admitted into the chosen people, no way he could ever experience the kingdom of God. He was permanently on the outside looking in. Until Jesus came. Jesus came and healed the man, purified him, made him clean, made it so that he could experience what it was like to be part of God's chosen people. By the healing power of Jesus, this unclean one was made clean and thus given a place among the people of God.

The healing power of Jesus doesn't just make sick people healthy; it makes broken people whole; it makes the excluded, included, sinners, redeemed.

That's what the healing power of Jesus does for us. It takes a bunch of sinners, unworthy to be counted among the people of God, and declares us clean, welcome, accepted. We are accepted, not because we have done something to make us acceptable. We are accepted because by the grace of Jesus, we have been declared holy, pure. The letter of Jude ends with the words that Jesus is able to present us "without blemish" into the presence of God.

That's the good news of the gospel. By the grace of Christ, you and I have been healed, made whole, welcomed among the people of God. Thanks be to God. †