

Stepping Out on the Other Side

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Luke 8:26-39

Today I'm going to talk about healing, and how through the process of healing we can move closer to God in Love. But before we delve into healing, I'd like to tell you something about the vacation bible camp that our church put on this week. Our children and youth had a great week with Kristen at MADD Camp. And if you've never seen MADD Camp in full swing, let me tell you, it is a sight to behold. Each day the children get to wear a different theme of clothes—there's crazy sock day, pajama day, sports day... They learn a new stories, this year included Creation, Noah's Ark, the Good Shepherd, and even Mother Theresa.

MADD Camp is another example of how our church serves not only the children of the congregation, but also the children of our whole community. And because I know Kristen isn't going to toot her own horn about this, I've gotta tell you, Kristen is both the visionary and glue that holds it together. She's got the teenagers well prepared to work with the children, she's got a theme, and most importantly, she's got snack lined up! When I picked up my three campers on Wednesday, I asked them what the story was for the day. And they said, The Ten Commandments. But then Aaron said, "yeah but Kristen added extra commandments. Really there are like 13 commandments." As a student of theology myself I ask, "Oh, really? What are the extra commandments?" And Jonah said, "Love your neighbor, Love yourself, and God loves us." So in addition to very loud versions of camp songs happily sung at our dinner table, I am so glad they are learning about God's Love at church. Because how our children experience church at this age will impact how they value their faith for the rest of their lives. Kristen, we will miss you.

So now, let's get to the sermon. I believe that in God, all things are possible. Let's just start there. Let's start there because a scripture reading about Jesus performing an exorcism on a man infected with a host of demons, if taken literally, seems pretty far-fetched for this modern preacher. Sure, I've been in churches light years away from here theologically and geographically, where people were "stricken by the spirit" and their bodies were overcome—that's not really a part of my daily life as a Mom here in Sebastopol. But I do believe that God, who is Love incarnate, can change any of us, can bring healing to those in the most pain. And that is something I can get my mind and heart around. So this morning we're going to talk about three things: today's reading as metaphor, healing through forgiveness, and crossing boundaries in the name of compassion.

The use of metaphor was as ordinary in ancient literature as it is now. The story of the healed man is a lot like the fairy tales where a cursed swan, or frog, or donkey turns out to be a prince; or a wrinkled old woman is seen as having a beautiful heart, receives a kiss and turns into a young princess. There are countless stories where the hero is masked by some curse so he appears ugly until someone notices the beauty inside him. Only then is he outwardly transformed so that others see him as a whole person too. These ancient stories and fairy tales have endured over the centuries because they speak to something universal—the need to be seen.

Fairy tales are powerful because all of the characters represent parts of us—we all have the capacity to be the cursed prince whose heart is good, there is part of us who could have caused the curse, and part of us who could be the one who sees through the false mask. When the maiden and prince get married at the end of most of these stories, it's actually symbolic of the unity of the self—for we all have the maiden inside of us, and the prince too. Something of every character lives inside each of us. That gives us room to feel compassion for each character and for all the parts of ourselves. So what happens when we read this Bible story metaphorically, with the characters representing parts of ourselves?

In Luke we find today's reading placed between two other stories that showcase Jesus' power: the calming of a storm, and the raising of Jairus' daughter. It's kind of a trifecta—Jesus has power over nature, over evil, and over death. Today's reading opens with Jesus getting in a boat in Galilee and sailing to the opposite side. If you look on a map, the Gerasenes region is literally and figuratively opposite the place Jesus is coming from. The Gerasenes are Gentile, pork-eating farmers who are culturally more Greek than Semitic. The author of Luke is reminding us that Jesus is a healer and savior to the Gentiles as much as to the Jewish community. Jesus gets out of the boat in this opposing place and heals a man possessed by a demon. And when the demon says its name is Legion, Lukes' audience would have heard that as a play on words—legion as in "many," and legion as in "Roman oppression."

As far as metaphor goes we now have the opposing place and legion—but there's also the naked, demon-possessed man who lives in the tombs. He is a symbol of what it meant to be unclean. Even the Greek reflects this man's loss of humanity—before he meets Jesus, he is referred to as "aner," which means male. He's literally called, "a male of the city." But when Jesus commands the unclean spirit to come out of him, he is "anthropon," human being. Jesus separates the man from the stereotype, giving him life as a whole human person. The demons are driven into a herd of pigs, which were seen as unclean animals, and drowned in the sea—the abyss being a symbol of hell. Luke is telling us that oppression can go drown itself with the pigs. Not surprisingly, the Gerasenes are weirded out by this situation, and ask Jesus to leave. For Jesus, even those on the fringes—the most marginalized—are human beings. Jesus tells the healed man to go back to his home—he now has a home—not to the tombs. He gets to go back and have a life. Jesus tells the man to go tell how much God has done for him, but instead he proclaims how much Jesus has done for him. Proclaim is the operative word here, it's

a cue to the audience because “proclaim” was always what people did with the good news, the gospel. So the healed man, now a whole human being, becomes one who proclaims the gospel, a bearer of good news of life in Jesus.

Today’s reading is a story about many things—about the power of good over evil, resistance to oppression, fear of the unknown. But above all else, it’s a story of healing. The Christian definition of healing is not only curing an illness, but being transformed through illness. Sometimes transformation is for the one who is sick or in pain, but sometimes transformative healing is meant for those around the person who is ill. In this case, Jesus heals the man by seeing his humanity under the layers of how the man presents himself. When Luke says, “the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed,” he uses the word “esothe.” “Esothe” which is translated as “healed” but it means “from within” or “soul.” There is an internal healing that happens here. But who knows, perhaps one of the swineherds or Gerasenes was moved in his or her heart, and was healed as well? How can we, in the sanctuary of our own lives, foster an inner transformation that brings us more life, more health, more connection to others? This word, “esothe,” is related to the Greek word “sozo,” which is “to save,” or “to restore to health.” Because, when there is an inward warming of the heart, there is a step toward overall health.

Of course, before we get all fuzzy and gooey talking about health and wellness, we have to take a peek at the things that prevent us from living into wholeness in the first place. In the Order for Healing in the UCC Book of Worship, it says, “Guilt, anxiety, fear, broken relationships, and the loneliness of alienation all contribute to human sickness.” So even here, health is set in the context of relationships. This is kind of a bummer for anyone who thinks that a short walk or a juice cleanse, in and of itself, will create health. Sure it is probably a good idea from time to time, but it can only be part of the picture. The hard work of honesty and reparation must come into play.

It’s amazing to me how forgiveness is often intertwined with healing. So many times forgiveness is like a gateway to healing—forgiving someone (or ourselves) opens the door for healing to happen. In working with children I find that getting them to say the words, “I forgive you,” is not enough. In addition they really need to say, “You are my brother/sister and I love you.” True forgiveness is inward and will actually remove the hurts we have from our hearts, like pulling weeds in a garden. Forgiving is not simply a gift we give someone who has wronged us, either; it is a step in our own spiritual growth that will enable our hearts to blossom as intended. Jesus saw the humanity and goodness in the unclean man, and I wonder if the “esothe,” the inward movement inside of him, was the spirit of self-forgiveness that led to his healing. In the end I wonder if Jesus sent the man who had been possessed by Legion back to his home because the people of the Gerasenes needed to forgive him, as part of their healing? Then the whole community might experience transformation.

But how does healing through forgiveness actually happen? In his book *Zen Confidential* Shozan Jack Haubner writes about the sometimes irritating squabbles of living in a Zen monastery. He says, “Group monastic living has taught me that the people in your life don’t get in the way of your spiritual practice; these people are your spiritual practice.” In one particularly pointed exchange, Shozan Haubner is able to shift his feelings really quickly from anger to compassion—why? Because the monk he facetiously calls Tirade-San, in his turquoise sweat pants, has loosened up and flashed him a smile. It’s a great example of how sometimes, if one person can relax a little, the whole situation, the whole system can calm down.

It is true that the people whom we like the least can function as sacraments to invite us to look at those aspects of ourselves which we dislike. Sometimes we may take the parts of our selves of which we are ashamed, and project that shame onto others. It’s a common way of diverting ourselves away from something that hurts. But when we avoid the parts of ourselves that we don’t like, we may cut ourselves off from opening these painful parts up to God’s love, which accepts all of us—not just the “good” parts. God’s love can heal us and transform us so that we may live life from our true center, which is Love. If God can see through the Gerasene Demoniac, surely God’s love can see our humanity too and love us, even when we might feel unlovable.

God happens in relationships—“where two or three are gathered, there is God.” And so healing happens in relationships too, that is where life is. So when we leave here today, how will each of us attend to healing in our relationships? Is your “juice cleanse” making an uncomfortable phone call to a brother or sister you haven’t had a “good reason” to call in ten years? Is there a friendship you can help calm down by being the monk in the turquoise sweat pants, and just relaxing the tone? Is there some situation in your life where you can down-shift a layer of your own anxiety to make room for compassion?

Jesus acts as one who goes across the lines of oppositional thinking. He physically crosses the sea to an opposing side. He is met by a man whose humanity was unseen, and Jesus crosses the bounds of social norms to heal this unclean man. He crosses all these lines to show that there is humanity in us all, there is goodness and life, even in people who are different from us. Compassion heals us from within, compassion for that wild part of ourselves, compassion for others who act in ways that don’t make sense to us. We are being called by this story to strive, to work toward healing and forgiveness in our own lives, trusting that God sees our wholeness even when we cannot.

So there you have it. My time here has come to a close. In this sermon we explored today’s reading as metaphor, healing through forgiveness, and crossing boundaries in the name of compassion. And if your eyes glazed over a tiny bit while I was down the rabbit hole with my Greek New Testament (talking about the juxtaposition of the words “aner” for male, and “anthropon” for human being), don’t worry. All you need to know, you can learn at MADD Camp!