

## **Sermon: A Social Salvation**

**Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Ashcroft-Townsley**

**Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39**

No one alive today in the Western world can miss the overwhelming presence and, indeed, impact of social media in its many iterations. With the advent of smart phones, we are constantly in touch with one another, whether we want to be or not. Like many of you, I'm sure, I have a sort of love/hate relationship with "the socials" as they are now called. They often bring out the worst in people and seem to be further dividing us down ideological lines. People I know who held moderate positions on many issues have become, in recent years, swayed by extremist views—many of which, sadly, are falsehoods and conspiracies created to do the very damage they are, in fact, doing over social media. One of their greatest drawbacks, for me, is that they tell us things we never wanted to know about people—things we never may have known without their presence. They can create jealousies and a self-centered perspective. And when that happens, social media can become destructive to our relationships.

While they're are not inherently evil and whatever their value in keeping us connected, it's clear to me that these platforms ought to be used judiciously. Yet, when we understand the stories behind their creation, as in, for instance, the film *The Social Network*, we can see why we should approach carefully and with eyes wide-open: their creation and function have not come from a very good place. Keeping folks connected is the guise for getting what an individual wants, driven by motives not entirely altruistic. In the film about Facebook, we learn that the platform was created by a man bent on revenge and getting an ex-girlfriend back.

Despite all its drawbacks, there are moments I am immensely grateful for things like Facebook: when I see a fundraising campaign for a good cause, for instance. Recently, a campaign came across my feed to raise money for a family whose child had been diagnosed with cancer and whose medical bills they would not be able to afford. When I clicked on the link, I saw that people all over the country had contributed and that little girl's cancer bills would be so much less burdensome on that family than they would have been without that. The social part of this thing we call social media had come to the rescue in a big way for this family as it has for many, many others.

Looking at our scriptures for today, I can see where this sort of campaign might have been tentatively appealing for our friend, the Gerasene Demoniac, from whom Jesus drove a legion of demons. If you could have paid for an exorcism, which only Jesus was performing, I wonder what it would have cost? Certainly, more than this poor soul could have ever imagined coming up with. Fortunately for our demoniac, that kind of campaign was unnecessary, because Jesus stumbles upon him as he steps onto land in Gerasene. This happens after he's already blown the minds of the disciples in calming a raging storm which had threatened to overwhelm their boat.

The text tells us that for a long time, the man wracked with demons had worn no clothes and that he lived among the tombs rather than in a house. Think about that for a second—this is clearly a man who has lost all hope of help. He's been ostracized from society, set apart and not in a good way. I imagine that if the man had wanted to live in a house, he was not allowed to. Tombs in first century Jerusalem were often of the type that needed to

be stooped to get into and they were small, particularly if they were not tombs of well-to-do members of society. I have to think that anyone living in tombs was not living in the tombs of people who could have afforded to keep them out of their loved ones places of rest. The text also tells us he was bound with chains and shackles, so he wasn't moving freely regardless of what kind of tombs he was in.

So as we think of the Gerasene demoniac, we must remember that he is the poorest of the poor, and one of the most marginalized of the marginalized. He is not someone who had a right to approaching an infamous teacher like Jesus, but he is desperate. He cries out in his desperation, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!" We do not know in this moment if it is the demons or the man speaking, until, that is, Jesus asks what his name is, and the demons inside him say, "We are legion," meaning, it's not just one demon inhabiting the man, but many. When the demons ask not to be banished to the abyss, but instead to be put into a herd of pigs... Jesus acquiesces to their request. At once the demons leave the man and head into the pigs, who then hurl themselves into the lake and drown.

At first glance, this may seem like a story so far removed from our current reality. Who believes in demons, anymore, after all? Yet, if we stop and think about it for just a moment, we might come to realize we aren't quite as far removed as we think. Today, our demons go by many names, but they have the same death-dealing ways be they addiction, racism, sexism, all-consuming anger, envy or any number of other "demons" that can overwhelm our lives and which, coincidentally, often get put onto full display in the social media age. Mark Z, creator of Facebook, himself, is

propelled to create Facebook as a result of his own personal demons. And in each and every case, many of our best attempts to resist them are often thwarted—as though these demons really are legion, as if they really do have mind of their own.

And yet, the demons that plague this man do not have the final say. They cannot resist or thwart the saving grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ and, by the time we get to the “end of the story” of this Gerasene demoniac, he has gone from being unclothed, unhoused, chained, and sequestered from anyone who could ever love him to being welcomed, unbound, and, most importantly, as the text, itself, tells us, sitting at the feet of Jesus clothed and in his right mind. The man wants to follow Jesus, which is a joyful turn of events. But we need to pay attention to what happens next because Jesus doesn’t want him to literally follow where he goes, but tells him to return home—yes, home, not to the tombs—and to “declare how much God has done for him. And then there’s a subtle, but important note to end this pericope: “So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much *Jesus* had done for him.” Thus, I think, indicating that, for this former demoniac, what Jesus had done for him *was* what God had done for him. That’s important to repeat, Jesus tells him to go and share what God has done and the former demoniac shares what Jesus has done. This story teaches us that in Jesus, we, too, are brought face-to-face with God.

In his action of sharing the good news of his healing through Jesus, the former demoniac gives us glimpses of the very thing the early church will become known for and before they really even begin doing it. Jesus flips the script on the death-dealing ways of the shackles the demons had literally and figuratively put upon this man, and turns it into something life-

giving: in his restoration, we see glimpses of our own. We see what we can be if only we follow in the footsteps of our Savior who came before us and who calls us into the work of being the church with him. This restoration is not to a solitary life of meditation and it is not into the act of worship in a temple, but rather, it is restoration to community. It is not solely showing up to worship on a Sunday, but it is a social action. For this man as for us, salvation is social, not individual. He isn't told to go live alone, but to go share the good news with the neighborhood. He isn't told to literally worship at Jesus's feet, in fact, he's told to get up and go into the world. He's literally called out of the presence of death in the tombs and into the life of the neighborhood he called his home.

Often, this text is used to show the individual healing power of Jesus—but really, this text is giving us much more than a simple healing story: it is reminding us that our responsibility isn't primarily to ourselves, but to our community. In other words, we belong to each other. We belong to each other. We see in this text that where we marginalize (as the people had done to this man), Jesus prioritizes. The people of Gerasene were content to push this man to the margins so much so that they relegated him *literally* to the dead. And then here comes Jesus, putting this man's wellbeing first on his list of life-giving tasks as he steps ashore. Jesus shows us what we too often forget, our salvation is bound up in the salvation of others. Our freedom is tied to the freedom of our neighbors. It's why Jesus so often mentions the Kingdom of God over and above any kind of personal salvation. God's plan is not for one, but for all. Not individual alone, but social. And, as we saw in our reading from Paul's letter to the church at Galatia today, God's plan goes far beyond our expectations and rules—and

that is because God's grace breaks us free of the bonds of the world to focus on the things that matter. So Jesus doesn't get bogged down by the fact that, according to the law, this man is unclean, but instead he understands that this man is more than enough just as he is. God's grace is sufficient to cover even him, he is worthy of healing, love, and inclusion. And that's what matters. Not marginalization, but prioritization.

This text calls us to consider how we, as followers of the great human prioritizer, can live more boldly into the vision of a world that pushes back against the death-dealing forces that threaten to overwhelm us—that propels us to understand what is clear through both social media's reach and that of the pandemic: that our world is no longer one in which we can consider ourselves cloistered or protected from the “out there” and the “them.” Friends, we exist in an interconnected web of being and that fact cannot be forgotten as we enter the future as individuals or as the church. When the social media madness calls to us to shut ourselves away, we must resist. We must push forward. We can't keep saying that the bad things are only happening in some nebulous “out there” because out there is also in here. We no longer live in a world where we can keep to ourselves and expect our community to grow. There is no “us” and “them” anymore. We are too interwoven. If we are, in fact, committed to community, then we must be out in that community filling unmet needs and living boldly into the restorative vision of Jesus Christ. What happens in Manchester doesn't stay in Manchester. What happens outside of Carroll County doesn't stay outside of Carroll County. Jesus teaches us through this broken man that our healing is the healing of all, our life is the life of all. We belong to each other. Let's act like it. Amen.

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## **Father's Day Blessing**

Loving Creator God,

We give thanks for the men of virtue who have touched our lives.

Those who have shown us kindness, courage, generosity, truth, compassion, faith, and love.

Bless all sons and brothers and fathers and grandfathers who reveal a glimpse of your loving presence on earth.

And bless those for whom this day brings up floods of conflicting emotion, for whom this day is painful, or who may not be able to honor its spirit in the way others do. Be with those who cannot celebrate, but who must endure, and give them strength.

Amen.