

### ***Gerasene Demoniac***

Text(s): Mark 5:1-20

- Pastor Kari Pancoast

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This probably isn't a story everyone has heard before. It isn't one of the nicer stories about Jesus—not a story we usually get in our Sunday text when we are using our normal lectionary texts. It's not one we usually read in Sunday school. So this story that we call the Gerasene Demoniac is one that not a lot of people are familiar with. It's a strange story at the very least—one we aren't always really sure what to do with. But even though we recognize this as not one of the nice, comfortable stories about Jesus' ministry, I think the offense of this story really is lost on us. We don't hear it with the same offensive reaction the people would have heard it in Jesus' day.

When I think of the offensive nature of this story, it makes me think of TV shows or comedians who offend for the sake of the humor or the shock value of the offense. In our culture, there is a line of what is appropriate or acceptable and most of the time, with most people, the line is just hinted at once in a while or maybe it is like a toe just barely reaches across the line. But there are some shows and performers I just cannot watch because they leap over the line every time. There are even some people that are hard to be around because they seem to leap across the line every chance they get! It seems to be the goal of some to shock and offend. If the line of what is appropriate or not is here—they are way over there! They leap waaay over the line for the sake of a laugh or the shock value or the attention... or who knows what!

This story of Jesus is kind of like that. Jesus leaps over the line of what is acceptable. Jesus leaps over the line, not for the shock value or to get a laugh, but to demonstrate the total radical nature of his love. Jesus is in foreign land—something not really acceptable for the Jews who had so many religious laws to keep them separate from others. Plus the messiah, the savior, was promised to the Jews, so what was Jesus doing there in Genesareth among Gentiles—non Jews? So the fact that Jesus is there is offensive.

Then, he is there where there are pigs and swine herders— those who care for the pigs! Pigs were considered unclean, so after encountering pigs, a Jew would have to go through a ritual of cleansing in order to be allowed back into the worshipping community. And, Jesus was there among the tombs—in the graveyard—which would not have been acceptable. And to make it even worse, he was talking with a demon possessed man who had been banished to the graveyard because of his destructive, offensive behavior and the fact that no one could control him. So just imagine how shocking and offensive this story would be for the people of his day to hear! Jesus leaps across the line of what is appropriate or acceptable.

But Jesus doesn't leap over the line to offend for the sake of offending—but to offend with the radical outpouring of his love and mercy! The people there with Jesus don't yet see this—the radical love and mercy of Jesus. But the demons, the unclean spirits, who are torturing the man do! "What have you to do with us, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you by God, do not torment!" They immediately recognize and are threatened by the power of Jesus' amazing love.

Jesus casts the demons into the pigs who then run off a cliff and are drowned—another piece of this story that we might miss is the how amazing that is. Pigs can swim. But not this time. The offensive claim is that Jesus is more powerful than even the demons. The demons are destroyed. The man whom they possessed is freed from them completely. The swineherds ran

off to tell everyone what happened and the people had to come and see for themselves. We might imagine the people would be thrilled with this! But when they come and see Jesus sitting there with the demoniac who is now clothed and in his right mind, they are not thrilled—they don't react by praising Jesus or asking him to perform other miracles. They beg Jesus to leave them!

The people recognize Jesus' power and instead of being amazed and comforted by the love and mercy he showed to the man who had been possessed—instead of being amazed at the new life that man received in Jesus, the people are terrified and want Jesus to leave them! They are afraid of what that transforming love will do in their lives and to their world. The demons they live with; the brokenness of their world is at least familiar and they have convinced themselves that this brokenness is manageable. To be freed from the demons in their own lives would result in a total change of their reality. They would no longer be able to fool themselves with the illusion that they have control of their lives. Any illusion of control of their own lives would be lost. They would have to admit that their life would belong to Jesus who gives them new life, free from the demons that torture them.

I wonder how often we are like those people who witnessed the freeing of that Gerasene Demoniac. We suffer from our own demons, but we hold onto them because at least they are familiar. We have convinced ourselves that we are in control because we have figured out how the system of our broken world works. We have figured out how to manage our broken life so at least we can keep going and give ourselves the illusion of control. To be transformed by Jesus' love and mercy for us would so totally change our lives that we are afraid of the radical love Jesus has for us! We want him to stay away

But Jesus won't stay away. He comes to us in his radical love and frees us from the demons that hold us hostage. Jesus' love for us is so radical it is almost offensive. No one loves like this! How can it be? He loves us more than we can ever imagine. He even dies to forgive us our sins, to free us from our demons, and to give us new life. To be transformed by Jesus' love and mercy for us changes our life completely. Our life is no longer our own but belongs to our gracious savior who gives us life. We can no longer live turned inward on ourselves, focusing on our own needs and desires and wishes. We instead are transformed to live a life that is focused outwards on sharing the love of Jesus with others!

We are transformed to be like that Gerasene Demoniac who, once freed from his demons, begged to go with Jesus so that he might be near him. But instead Jesus said, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." We are transformed by Jesus' love for us so that we can go out and share this same radical, life-changing love in the world around us—even the world so close as our neighbors and family and friends. Thanks be to God. Amen.