

Date: Sunday June 20, 2010

Scripture: Luke 8:26-39

Title: "Choices Along the Way"

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus heals a demon possessed man.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): God's love helps to pull the pieces of our lives together even before we know that's what we need.

(Remember, it's all about God!)

We are in the midst of the summer travel season. Traveling is something that most everyone enjoys. Rather by plane, train, or automobile, hundreds of millions of people worldwide travel from one place to the next for business, pleasure, and to take in new sights and scenery. It can be a delightful experience.

However, our travel plans don't always work out exactly as we expect. We can attest to that right here at Immanuel as the youth group, chaperones, and I unexpectedly spent a night in the Atlanta Airport on our way to Orlando and Disney World while on our Christian Education trip. No harm done with the airport accommodations, but when disruptions occur during travel, it does take time and effort to regroup and secure alternate arrangements. We were able to do just that and still made it to our first park, Animal Kingdom, by about 10:30 Monday morning. Still, anytime there are disruptions of any kind, travel or otherwise, we have to stop and pull together the pieces.

I mention all this today because in our Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus is traveling. He is traveling by boat and lands on the eastern shore of the Sea of

Galilee along the edge of the lake where there are tombs cut into the mountains above. Out of the tombs comes a screaming, howling man. He runs to greet Jesus. He has been banished to live in the cemetery because people believe he is possessed by demons. Now the man finds an opportunity to rush out of the graves and yells out. This certainly would not have been what Jesus and his party were expecting at this point in their travels. Jesus has a choice how to handle the situation. And, of course, Jesus chooses to care for the man.

The first century world was different from our world. In the ancient time it was necessary to take a boat to travel across the Sea of Galilee. Today, you can go around the sea by automobile in a relatively short period of time; something I was able to do last spring. Also, in the ancient time, regardless of what we think about demons today, they were intensely real to the people of that ancient place and especially to this poor man sentenced to live in the tombs. Demons were thought to be responsible, not only for diseases like epilepsy and mental illness, but also for every physical ailment. The people believed that demons lived in unclean places like the graveyard and that they were destroyed primarily through drowning. Demons were especially dangerous to women in childbirth, children who were out after dark, and, think about this one, the newly married.

Brett Younger writes that the ancient ideas may seem silly, but when the biblical writers speak of being possessed by demons, they use strikingly appropriate terms. Modern psychology has given the old demons new names like paranoia and schizophrenia, but the old names correspond more closely to what people feel.

Deeply conflicted people don't feel like they have a chemical imbalance. They feel possessed by a power that's taken control. When we're depressed, we don't feel like we have a chemical deficiency, we feel overwhelmed.

Some mental illnesses can be effectively treated, and some can't. Many people who suffer from depression can with a little medication function quite well as physicians, accountants, pastors, and teachers. Others are possessed by what seems to be a legion of demons. Everyday life proves overwhelming, and finally the family makes the choice to send the afflicted person into an institution. The Gerasenes sent their mentally ill to the cemetery in the hills.

While the man approaching Jesus may have been unexpected, Jesus response wasn't. Jesus always looks to care for those who have been sent away. He seems to have no fear of becoming an outcast himself, and so Jesus ministers along the margins of society. He finds the sick, possessed, homeless, and sinful. And on occasion they find him. The man in today's passage who has such great reason to believe in demons runs at Jesus and shouts at the top of his lungs: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" (Luke 8:28). Jesus immediately feels compassion for this broken man, half shackled, completely ostracized. Jesus asks his name and the man answers, "Legion" (V.31). This person is so pulled apart that he feels like a mob of a thousands.

If a story this unusual can have a most unusual part, it's the part about the pigs. As the man screams, a herd of pigs stampedes into the lake. Commentators

like William Barclay suggest that the man's yelling frightens the swine into the proof that the man needs. He would never believe that he's cured unless he has visible evidence.

The herders who had been in charge of the pigs run to town and tell what has happened. What happened for them was not that a person was healed, but that the pigs had stampeded to their death and "it wasn't our fault, really, you've got to believe us, it wasn't our fault." In response, the people of the town come to take a look and find this former mental patient sitting at Jesus' feet. We might guess that the Gerasenes would invite Jesus to stay, but they must not care for change, because they ask Jesus to leave at once; just another change in his travel schedule.

So Jesus, who was often willing to shake the dust off his feet, gets back into the boat without a word and prepares to set sail. The person who's been healed looks at Jesus, at the crowd who banished him to the graveyard, and then back at Jesus: "Please, let me go with you!" He's ready to follow. There's room in the boat. But Jesus makes clear, "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you" (V.39). The man went and told them how Jesus put his life back together.

This isn't simply the story of one person's healing. Luke writes this story so that his community and now all of us will catch a glimpse of the grace that holds our lives together. God comes to us in our conflict, unexpectedness, and confusion and offers us a sense of purpose. Our name doesn't have to be "Legion," for we are called "Christian."

It's an evil spirit that destroys the hope of a single purpose by pulling us in a thousand directions. We have such divided loyalties. We want this and that and the other thing. We constantly have to choose between work and home, church activity or something else, helping others and taking a break, we want to do and need to do, there's what's good and there is always what's better.

As humans we do get frustrated by not being able to travel all of the roads at once. We know people who can't bring themselves to choose. I read this week about a young man who is a genius. He graduated from college with honors. He is a wizard at science and mathematics. He could have done almost anything, but as the story goes, many years after graduating he still hasn't decided what to do. To misquote Yogi Berra, "When he comes to a fork in the road, he takes it." He drifts from job to job, because he can't focus on one thing (Younger).

It's hard to make up our minds. Do you ever think you should have been a doctor or a cowboy or a talk show host? Do you have troubling ordering in restaurants? No matter what you order do you catch yourself looking at what other people are eating and wondering if you made a mistake? Do you ever spend way too much time at Dairy Queen trying to decide what flavor of Blizzard to order? Do you end up eating Reese's Peanut Butter but wishing it was Heath Bar?

We're constantly forced to do this or that but not both. We feel like we should start jogging and read the best sellers and meditate thirty minutes a day and learn French and cook healthier meals and take time to pray. We want to be good employees, good friends, good neighbors, and a good deal more rested than we are.

We set our sights on a dozen different pursuits. It's hard for us to say, "This one thing I choose." But look in any direction and you see the truth. We cannot have everything all at once. Choice is built into the essence of our existence.

God offers the grace that holds our lives together. If we center our lives in grace, then love becomes the criteria by which we choose and love may lead us to the kinds of places to which Jesus went. If we live focused on God's love, then we won't get everything we want or avoid all the pain we'd like to steer clear of. But loving God and one another, first, foremost, and finally, will give our lives meaning. Luke writes that the healed man sits at the feet of Jesus in his right mind. Letting God teach us to love is a step towards sanity and a way to make sense of our lives. We can't have it all, so we need to choose what's best (Younger).

During this summer if we find our travels plans unfolding just as we thought they would we can give thanks to God and God's grace for the goodness that is occurring. When things don't go well, when we find we have taken that wrong turn at Albuquerque, and we need to pull together the broken pieces of our itineraries, God's love helps us hold it all together. Today's good news is that no matter where we are on life's journey, the choices we have made, or the circumstances we are facing, we get God's grace, and love, and peace – gifts for us all. We, too, are healed by the power of the presence of God in our lives. Now we can choose to return to our homes and to declare how much God is doing for us. That's a blessed road to travel. Let us pray.

Lord,

For traveling with us each step of the journey, we offer our thanks. Take care of the needs we have with your infinite wisdom and continue to remind us to be messengers of your good news and grace. So we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Offering:

God has richly blessed us for life's journey and we now have the opportunity to share. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication:

Lord we ask that you accept and bless what we offer and may the ministries we undertake with these gifts build up the body of Christ. So we pray, Amen.

Benediction:

We go forth blessed by God's amazing grace and ready to share our grace filled stories with others. So let us go and share in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Younger, Brett; McAfee School of Theology; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2010.
Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.