

SERMON TITLE: "A Story of Freedom"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 5:1-20
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 1, 2018, at FUMC

INTRODUCTION

At this time of year, we celebrate the freedom of our nation. We think about how our founding fathers rose up in opposition to laws that were oppressive, wrote the Declaration of Independence, and then fought the Revolutionary War to realize that freedom. Even at church, we pray the blessing:

My country tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride,
From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

Of course, the definition of freedom isn't only one nation's separation from another. Just this past week, I encountered persons who were gaining independence from many situations: a job misunderstanding that was creating too much stress, a childcare center that wasn't providing appropriate supervision, and two different family situations that were emotionally and physically unsafe. I also prayed with two people who were leaving their sick, limited, and mortal bodies behind, as they journeyed with God into the expansive freedom of eternal life.

This morning's gospel reading from Mark 5 is like that. The man who came out of the tombs to meet Jesus was deeply troubled by an unclean spirit that tormented him. Other people had been so bothered by this man's difficulties that they had tried to restrain him with shackles and chains, but nothing and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day, he howled and bruised himself with stones. You get the sense that this trauma had been going on for years. Today, we'd probably call this man mentally ill. In Jesus' day, they didn't know anything about psychology. To them, this man was demon possessed. He was a lost cause, a sad story. He was controlled by something neither he nor his society could fix—until Jesus gave him a new story of freedom.

Fortunately, most of us don't struggle with difficulties as great as those experienced by this Gerasene man. But recent celebrity suicides indicate to us that you don't have to live among the tombs or on the streets to be deeply troubled. The truth is that many people struggle with mental and physical illnesses, addictions, and work and family circumstances in which we feel like we're trapped. Here in the United States of America we proclaim independence, cherish our individual liberties, and frequently fight for our freedom. Still—more often than we'd like to admit—we can't seem to overcome feelings, anxieties, fears, habits, pains, tendencies, and expectations that limit who we are and what we can do. Despite the fact that our United Methodist theology upholds belief in free will, and our LDS neighbors remind us often about free agency, all of us frequently struggle to do the good we think we should and to avoid the evil we wish to shun. Because we sometimes lack the strength we need, I invite you to consider this miracle of healing. Let's see how Jesus can provide us all with a story of freedom.

1—GET CLOSE TO JESUS

What I see first in this story of freedom is that it's important to get close to Jesus. Jesus took the first big step by sailing across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples left the familiar and Jewishly-righteous parts of Judea and entered into the unknown and unclean Gentile territory in the country of the Gerasenes. This Jesus who frequently ate with tax collectors and sinners didn't hold himself above or away from troubled people. Jesus was willing to go where he was needed.

Of course, Jesus could only help those who allowed him to get close. This Gerasene man was handicapped in many ways, but he did the one most important thing he could do. Verse two tells us that he immediately went out of the tombs to meet Jesus. In verses six through eight, however, we get the information that the man with the unclean spirit only came part way. At first, he kept his distance. Jesus tried to cast out the spirit from that distance, but it didn't work. The man then came closer and bowed down before Jesus. Only then, when he and Jesus were in speaking range, and Jesus could ask him his name and learn a little bit about him—only then was Jesus able to release him from his captivity.

When we have difficult problems that hold us in bondage, Jesus is our best hope for real freedom. That's why it always strikes me as sad when people run away from God and give up on faith when they're having trouble. Why do people stop attending church when things go wrong in their lives? When we're caught in the swirl of complication and chaos and when we're overcome by insurmountable problems, that's precisely when we need spiritual help the most! That's exactly when we should be running out of the tombs and into the arms of the God who loves us. And I don't mean coming halfway and then stopping short of the throne of mercy and grace. I'm talking about diving in to the living waters of God's powerful love.

I know we all want to maintain a certain level of dignity. We don't want to be embarrassed. We don't want to air our dirty laundry. We don't want to come to church just to sit and cry or to inappropriately express the anger that is deep inside us. We don't want other people to see how mixed up and messed up and broken we are. But, my dear friends, please hear the message of this gospel passage. Jesus is here for us. In fact, if you go back and read the end of Mark chapter four, you can see that Jesus not only crossed a sea and some significant religious and cultural barriers to get to this man but also had to calm a storm on the way. No matter how bad our situation seems, Jesus really is doing his part to reach us. Jesus very much wants to heal us. Jesus is willing to come close to us, if we will allow him to do so. This story of freedom is available to all who will get close to Jesus.

2—STORY OF FREEDOM IN AND THROUGH A COMMUNITY

With that said, however, we also know there's more to this story of freedom than just us getting close to Jesus. Many of us in this room, maybe most of us, maybe all of us—have at some time or other prayed with all our might for healing for ourselves or someone else. We got as close to Jesus as we possibly could and trusted in his care, and still the freedom didn't come in the way we would have liked. So, there's a second part of this story of freedom that we need to realize. As much as we Americans, especially we western Americans, like to think of ourselves as rugged individualists, the story of freedom

isn't just "Jesus and me." The story of freedom is the more comprehensive story of Jesus helping an individual by working in and through a community.

In Mark 5, we see that the man's community had tried previously to help him. Their attempts to subdue him and chain him up had been unsuccessful, but they had done what they thought was right. And they might have been successful if the man's problems were simple. But, as the story indicates, his problems were legion. And complex problems require complex answers.

This story also assumes that the unclean spirits had to go somewhere. Apparently, because of the way ancient people understood reality, Jesus couldn't just make the demonic spirits vanish into thin air. So, the spirits asked Jesus to send them into a herd of pigs. We of modern sensibilities prefer that no animals are harmed in the making of our stories. But the Jews who first heard and read this story probably thought that detail was funny. Jews were forbidden from eating pork. They believed that pigs were unclean animals. So, to send the unclean spirits into unclean animals who then jumped into the sea and drowned probably seemed quite appropriate to the first Jewish hearers of this story.

But for those Gentile swine-herders who actually experienced these events, there would have been a rather significant economic loss. So it's no wonder that they then begged Jesus to leave their neighborhood. They may have been in awe and appreciation of this one miracle, but they didn't think they could afford that kind of economic cost to continue.

And, yet, that shared cost does seem to be an important part of this story of freedom. Yes, Jesus is here for us and wants to help and free us from our really difficult and intractable problems. Yes, Jesus has access to some incredible divine power. But some of our serious problems, if not all of them, are going to be costly. And that cost can't be borne by the individual alone. The story of freedom is a story of grants for basic research, scientific trials involving hundreds and thousands of people, and a society that's willing to bear and share the cost. People don't receive the help they need when they are individually blamed and isolated for problems that are due to genetics, social structures, environmental

exposures, and intergenerational poverty. Of course, none of us likes paying extra. Who wants our taxes or insurance rates increased to pay for someone else's healthcare and well-being? But I see here an indication that this man was healed not just by Jesus, but by a combination of resources available in and through the community.

Did you notice, in verse 18, that the healed man wanted to get into the boat with Jesus and sail off with him and the disciples? He probably wanted to leave his old life behind. But Jesus said, "Go home to your friends, and tell how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." The man did exactly that. Verse 20 tells us that "he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him."

If Jesus had extracted that man from his country, it would have been as if to say that he was a lone individual, an identified patient, who had had a singular problem that was now fixed, and everybody else could go back to normal. But because Jesus left the man there in his own country, the message was, instead, that Jesus had begun a healing of that whole area. As the friends, neighbors, and residents of the ten cities would hear and embrace the man's message for themselves and each other, they too would have a chance to claim their own healing. The story of freedom wouldn't be just about Jesus swooping in and miraculously curing one man. The story of freedom would be of what Jesus had done and could continue to do in and through the whole community, if they would be willing.

CONCLUSION

Our human lives are complex. If we have small problems, we usually fix them quickly and quietly—all by ourselves if possible. But when we have big chronic problems, there are usually many causes that require assistance from multiple sources. Fortunately, our remedy includes both Jesus and each other. May we all do our part to get close to Jesus and allow him to work in and through the whole community—for that is how we will be able to go out and proclaim a story of freedom.