

Luke 8:26-39
June 23, 2019

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

Jesus barely has one foot on the ground of a foreign land when he is met by forces that seek to defy God's will of life for all people – even Gentiles on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee. In this case it's a man who has been shunned by his own community and driven into the depths of despair and isolation by the forces of evil that had taken hold of his body.

While we don't know exactly what it was that ailed this man as in the ancient world a whole gamut of mental and physical illnesses identified and labeled one as demonically possessed, we do know they indeed wreaked their havoc on this man's well-being and stood in opposition to the promise set forth at the dawn of creation – that all people were created in the image of God. Whatever it was that controlled this man had caused his community to bind him hand and foot and seemingly strip him of his identity and place in society. Whatever the demons were that enslaved this man, we can discern from past accounts in the gospels that "all the 'demons' Jesus confronts have three things in common: they cause self-destructive behavior in the victim, the victim feels trapped in that condition, and they separate the victim from normal living in the family circle?"ⁱ

Such was the case with this man. Such is the case with many yet today trapped in isolation or fear that dehumanizes them and separates them from full inclusion into society. It would have been all too easy for Jesus simply to do an about face, leave foreign territory and get back in the boat with the disciples and return to a place of comfort. Yet, we know from scripture God will not do that. We know from the life Jesus Christ lived he is not for one but for all. We know he came not to be served but to serve and serve he does yet again in putting himself in harms way, in identifying with the victim, in showing empathy and compassion for the marginalized and vulnerable, and in setting free the one who once had been

bound and contained – by others who perhaps saw him as a lost cause, a disruption to their way of life, security, and happiness achieved through homogeneity and thus sought to keep the unclean out fearful that whatever plagued his weary body would contaminate the community.

I can only ask myself upon reading this text, has the world changed all that much? Who are those yet standing on the margins we stand in fear of? Who might disrupt our way of life, our personal agendas, and our walls of security and comfort we have erected? This text makes me ask myself the question, how have I been complacent in failing to get out of the boat with Jesus and stand with the demoniac he comes alongside to serve and set free? How has my desire of self-preservation led me astray from God's will of preserving the sanctity of all God has created. Lord have mercy, I cry out. Lord have mercy, we cry out for the ways we to have been complacent, as the church, for living into our vocation in joining our Lord and Savior in striving to bring restoration and wholeness to the lives of all enchained, isolated, and made the scapegoat of society. Lord have mercy, when we have failed to respond to God's immeasurable grace through the blood shed and the life given by our Lord in rescuing and saving us from the shackles of sin and returning us to a right relationship with the One who created us in the image his great love.

Save, Jesus does. Even when the voices of the world seek to send him away from disrupting what they know and have worked so hard to create. Even when the voices of evil plead not to be destroyed and sent into the abyss of darkness to which they rightfully belong. Yet again, Jesus breaks down the barriers that separate us one from another. Yet again, Jesus ushers in the kingdom of God and fulfills the prophecy of Simeon professed in the Temple as found in the second chapter of Luke upon holding the Christ child in his arms and praising God saying, "My eyes have seen your salvation...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29, 31-32 NRSV)

Jesus heals this man and Jesus calls us to journey in the boat with him to the opposite sides of the seas in which we live. Seas of separation created by racism,

hatred, and illness. Seas in which we encounter our neighbors created in that same image of God we are called to pray for, to forgive, and to stand with just as Jesus did. We are partners in the saving work of our Lord and Savior. Set free from the chains of sin that bind us and free to join with the once demon possessed man in today's text to go forth and proclaim how much God has done for us and for the world.

While at times we fail in our mission, repent and seek the grace and forgiveness of God we are assured will indeed come, the church also often, guided by the Spirit, adheres to the will of God and succeeds in carrying out its calling to come alongside Christ's saving work and travel with him amongst the tombs and dead places of the world. As Brooke DeJong writes, "It [i.e., the church] goes to the dead places of the world—the people in dead-end jobs, dead relationships, dead to hope, dead in addiction, dead in a legion of ways over which they have limited, if any, control—and speaks a word of life."ⁱⁱ It begs the church, our community of faith, to ask the question, how are we speaking life into situations that seem death-dealing?

One example of the church living into its calling to speak life amid death and enter the dead places of the world was highlighted in the Spring 2019 issue of ELCA World Hunger's publication called *Lifelines*. We hear the story of Gustin; a farmer, village leader, and community development volunteer of Beni in the Dowa district of Malawi in southeastern Africa. At the age of 57 Gustin suddenly became ill while working the fields he had cultivated his whole life and taught others to do the same. He needed the help of another to carry him out of the field and set him on his way to a physician. He later learned he was HIV-positive. This diagnosis is certainly one of death in many places of the world today. Not only physically but mentally and socially.

Gustin returned home fearing the worst but determined to fight. Through the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malawi and supported by our gifts to the ELCA and ELCA World Hunger, Gustin received treatment", not only medical, "but also the healing support of a counselor" who walked with him 12 miles each way to every

clinic visit and a “life-saving constellation of support that has helped to throw the stigma and life-taking effects of the disease off the cliff of popular opinion and debilitation, as his hope for the future and his faith are renewed each day.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Gustin is back in his community, talking about his life and walking with others affected by HIV/Aids and hoping to start his own business and help the community expand its feeding center, also supported by ELCA World Hunger, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi operates to provide nutrition to children under 5.

Gustin states, “If it wasn’t for the church, I wouldn’t be alive. But now I know my life is not over and I have a future.”

“Gustin’s story is one where the church risked accompanying someone humanity too often relegates to the tombs of the world, offering ways to live into new life.”^{iv}

Where, when or how has Jesus offered you a way to live into a new life? Where, when or how might the Spirit be calling us as a community to help others live into new life? Praise and thanks be to the God of new life. The God of healing and wholeness. The God of salvation revealed through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who rescues us daily from the chains of sin that bind us and sends the forces of evil back into the deep abyss from which they came.

ⁱ Michael Rogness, www.workingpreacher.org

ⁱⁱ Brooke DeJong, ELCA World Hunger Sermon Starters

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.