

The Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
June 19, 2022  
1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a  
Psalm 42 & 43  
Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 8:26-39

## Watch What Jesus Does

He lived near Gerasa, the Roman city of Jerash, located in modern Jordan. He lived among the tombs, as good as dead, afflicted by too many demons to name, cut off from community, cut off from hope.

Jesus and his disciples went by boat across the Sea of Galilee from the region called Galilee to that area near Gerasa.

As soon as Jesus stepped onto the land, the man met him. He accosted him immediately, got right up in his face. Then he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me."

"What is your name?" Jesus asked him.

*What is your name?*

"Legion," the man answered. Or as Mark's gospel has it, "My name is Legion, for we are many."

*Watch what Jesus does* in this story: Jesus, our model in all things, addresses this man—this strange, ill, naked, lonely man living on the margins. He does not rush past him or ignore him or pretend he isn't there. Jesus gets close to this man and allows the man to get close to him; he gets proximate. And he asks his name.

It's almost as if the demons were ready to leave the man, and the man was ready for them to leave. And what strength must this man have had to carry all those demons for so long by himself, all alone. For when Jesus gives the demons permission, they take over an entire herd of pigs and the force of their entrance drives the pigs to jump off the cliff into the sea. And this man by himself, all alone had suffered a long time with an affliction of that magnitude.

Don't get distracted by the demons or by the pigs jumping off the cliff.

*Watch what Jesus does:* first he looks at the man with demons; he sees him; he interacts with him; he affirms his humanity. The people of the community were

afraid of the man with demons. Perhaps he was afraid of them, too. They had often placed shackles on him, and he had repeatedly broken out of them. Better to live unshackled, naked, and alone on the edge of things. But what happens to people with issues who are unprotected, isolated, and deprived of basic necessities? They are first avoided and then often forgotten. They become caricatured objects rather than human subjects, converted into stereotypes and scapegoats. They are turned into “others,” “those people,” “the bogey man,” a category of creatures we tend to see as not the same as us, not as okay as us, not as deserving as us. In short, they are demonized—even if they don’t have demons.

Jesus is accosted by this guy, one of “those people,” on the steep bank of the lake, on the edge, and he interacts with him where he finds him, on the margin. Jesus spends some time on the edge with him. He confronts the confusing, complicated, and difficult reality of the man’s circumstances with insight and compassion. He affirms the man’s humanity. He treats the man, ministers to him, and the demons depart. He is no longer “the demoniac” but a person.

This was not a scheduled visit to Gerasa. Jesus and his posse were traveling around from place to place. He was healing and teaching and preaching everywhere they went. But no one in any of the places they visited got advanced notice they were coming. This day when he met Jesus in person started out for the man with so many demons like any other day for many years, just another day lived on the edge of things with his own particular burdens and shackles of body and mind.

It was just another day, just another hot Texas summer day 157 years ago this day, June 19, 1865, when Union General Gordon Granger and his troops arrived in Galveston. General Granger read General Orders No. 3: *“The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free.”*

With the sharing of this news 250,000 people in Texas learned that they were no longer enslaved. Slavery was over. They were free.

Emancipation for these 250,000 Texans and for the 2.9 million individuals who were enslaved in our country as the civil war ended did not happen overnight. In some places, slaveholders had kept the news of freedom a secret, forcing more labor from those they held captive. And even today, the structural racism baked into our systems and culture in this country has kept the full exercise of freedom and the equality of opportunity locked up and out of reach for the descendants of those emancipated slaves and other people of color as well. In some critical ways, even now, not everyone who is a citizen of our country enjoys freedom equally.

We are still figuring out how to scale liberty so that it indeed reaches and includes everyone. We still have much work to do around diversity, equity, and inclusion on many fronts. And we still have much work to do around how individual rights and public health and the common good are all interrelated. And all that work, which is reconciliation work, is the church's work as a body and the work of those who follow Jesus as individuals. The Spirit's guidance as to what is your part, my part in that work in any given season may come to us in the physical or spiritual equivalent of a great wind or an earthquake or a fire as Elijah witnessed. Or, it may come to us, as it did to Elijah in the sound of sheer silence: a still, small voice.

Jesus in our gospel today is dealing with one person enslaved by demons and one community that has previously isolated and shunned and mistreated and feared him. And Jesus restores the man to the community. How?

The people taking care of the pigs run into town with the unhappy news that they have lost the entire herd when the pigs leapt off the cliff. Everybody comes out to see. And they find the man, this strange not-quite-human to them man who had been so alien and so other for so long, and Luke says, they find him "clothed and in his right mind."

And what else? They find him sitting at the feet of Jesus. When a person is described with that phrase rendered into English as sitting at Jesus' feet, it means that person has become a true disciple of Jesus. This most shunned person, this most isolated of individuals has been recognized for who he truly is, beyond the status and issues that had kept him in a free-range prison for so long.

Is this a happy ending? Maybe; maybe not. It depends. Why? Because when the community sees the man—this one whom they have always categorized as crazy, sick, not like them, "the other"—when they see him clothed and in his right mind and sitting at the feet of Jesus, Luke's gospel says they were afraid. Luke says they were "seized with great fear." Afraid of what? Afraid of Jesus and his power? Afraid because they had no experience relating to this kind of person recently arrived in the community? Afraid that if Jesus stayed around more things in their world would change in ways that would force them to reconsider more of their other long-held opinions and ways of doing things and treating people?

The people want Jesus gone, and they ask him to leave. And Jesus leaves. He gets back in the boat and goes back across the lake to the other side. Back to where he came from.

And how about the man who has been healed? He asks Jesus, the sense of it is he *begs* Jesus, to let him go with him. He knows that Jesus recognizes who he is, that he is human, that he is a person, that he is accepted as a disciple, as a follower of Jesus. The gospels are filled with stories of people who are called by Jesus to follow him; some of them do; some of them don't. This man is healed by Jesus; he asks to go with him, and Jesus doesn't allow it.

Jesus gives this person with his health restored and his dignity recognized and his agency returned a different mission: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." And the man accepts the mission, goes away, and proclaims throughout the city, the place he is from, how much Jesus has done for him. After years of estrangement, the man is once again integrated into community.

*Watch what Jesus does.* And follow his example. That's our brief, our assignment. Recognize the humanity of everyone. We regularly affirm our baptismal covenant. The fifth promise of that covenant is that we will "strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being" with God's help.

This doesn't mean that we will respect those who seem to us to be dignified. It means that we will operate from the perspective that everyone has dignity because every human being is made in God's image; every person is a bearer of the image of God. It means we will treat them as such, even and perhaps especially when we don't like them, even when we would rather not deal with them, because it is what Jesus has called us to do. The world is too small now and the stakes are too high not to honor this fifth baptismal promise.

Respect the dignity of every human being. Of all colors, nations, races, languages, tribes, and political persuasions. Those we love easily and those with whom we struggle. The rich and the poor. The healthy and the sick. The housed and the homeless. The young and the old. The neighbor and the stranger. The friend and the enemy. The queer and the straight. The employed and the unemployed. The law-abiding and those who have broken the law. The native born and the alien. The incarcerated and the free. The living and the dead. As the reading from Galatians makes clear, all boundaries are broken down, all divisions dissolved for the community that gathers around Jesus the Christ.

Respect the dignity of every human being. And what does *respect* mean? Literally, to see again. The *spect* of *respect* is the same as in *spectacle*, *spectate*. To take another, deeper, more nuanced look. If we will draw near as Jesus did and does, we will see the dignity, the humanity of every human being, *and* we will follow Jesus' example of responding with insight and compassion, acting justly and also with

mercy, insisting on accountability and also offering grace. No matter their circumstances, choices, or crimes. No matter ours.

Respect. Take another look. Will you ask Jesus to leave your town? Or will you ask him what particular mission he has for you?