

“EVEN HARDER THAN FOLLOWING JESUS”

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Luke 8:26-39

(06-19-22) Final Sermon at RPC

As you know, today is my last sermon at RPC as your minister. I hope one day I will be invited back, but you never know. This is the second congregation I have had to say goodbye to in my calling as a minister. On both occasions, as the date of my last Sunday neared, I checked ahead to see what the appointed scripture reading for that Sunday would be. I have tried to preach with the approach that you don't get to pick and choose the texts that you like, that you want to preach on, but that in following the lectionary, which I tend to do, you are encountered by the text and need to respond to God's word as it presents itself. Well today we are encountered by a text about a demon possessed man. I don't know too many ministers who would choose this text to preach on as their last sermon in a congregation, but so be it!

There's a children's novel called ***The Crazy Man***, which isn't really only for children, that deals with a young girl named Emaline Bitterman, whose world is changed after a farm accident which mangles her leg. Her beloved dog Prince runs after a rabbit and Emaline chases her dog into the path of the farm tractor and her leg is accidentally run over, leaving her with a long convalescence and a permanent disability. Her father blames her dog and shoots him, then in a fit of guilt leaves Emaline and her mother and the farm, never to return.

Emaline's mother, out of desperation, hires Angus, a patient from the local mental hospital to help around the farm. Set in rural Saskatchewan in the 1960's, *The Crazy Man* examines issues of prejudice, disability and fear, especially fear of those who are different from the majority, whether they be immigrants, the disabled or the mentally challenged, like Angus. Through her relationship with Angus, Emaline is able to come to terms with her accident and her father's desertion.

One of the major events in the novel concerns the disappearance of a young boy during a snow storm. Many suspect that Angus has something to do with the disappearance, but it turns out that Angus is the one who saves the boy from freezing to death. Though there was little reason to believe that Angus had anything to do with the disappearance, **because he was the Crazy Man, people just assumed that he was to blame.**

There are people who fit the role of scapegoat all too well *and many of us are quite happy not to challenge our easy conventions. It's easier when the local drug dealer looks the part* and not like the middle aged neighbour next door. I watch the news about shootings in neighbourhoods and I see people who appear on TV as witnesses and I often think to myself, yup, they look like the kind of people who **would** live in that kind of neighbourhood.

They just look the part. **I realize how easy it is to fall into the trap of stereotyping people because of how they look, how they speak, where they live.** Our text this morning from Luke's gospel takes us to the region of the Gerasenes, a Gentile region across the lake from Galilee. As he arrived there, Jesus was met by a demon possessed man from the town. This man had lived away from the town for many years, not wearing clothes or living in a house. He lived in the tombs, where the dead were buried. The demons that possessed this man were so many, they were called Legion. Jesus cast out the demons from the man and the demons entered a herd of pigs, which rushed down a steep bank into the lake and drowned. When the townspeople heard what had happened they rushed to the place where Jesus was. **What they found there troubled them at least as much as being told that their herds had been lost.** They found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at the feet of Jesus, dressed and in his right mind. **And they were afraid.**

I find that a very interesting phrase. **They were afraid - what were they afraid of?** Here was a man whom they had known was possessed and now he sat before them healed and in his right mind. **Shouldn't they have rejoiced?** Shouldn't they have been overcome with joyfulness and gratitude that one of their own had been restored? But instead of any of these things, they were afraid. **They were fearful - why?**

Because like Angus, this man was the Crazy Man. He was an easy target, a convenient scapegoat. As long as **he** was the way **he** was, at least the rest of the townsfolk could feel better about **themselves**. Maybe they weren't all that successful, all that happy or all that intelligent, but at least they weren't the crazy man living among the tombs. As long as they had the demon possessed man, they had someone to blame, someone who was not as good as them. **But now Jesus had come and shaken everything up. No longer was the demon possessed man different from them, he was just like them.** Who could they feel superior to now?

I also understand that they may have been fearful that Jesus would cause further damage to the local economy, just as he did when he allowed the pigs to drown themselves in the lake. And I suppose that the townsfolk may have been afraid that they would all lose their jobs and their livelihood. The theologian Fred Craddock writes, ***"It remains the case to this day that a community becomes very much involved when the impact of Jesus Christ affects the economy. And the gospel does stir the economy, because healings, conversions, and the embrace of Christian ethics radically influence getting and spending. The Gerasene people aren't praising God that a man is healed, but they're counting the cost and finding it too much."***¹

We welcome Jesus when Jesus meets our expectations,

¹ Fred Craddock, Interpretation – Luke

we embrace Jesus when Jesus affirms our preconceptions of what's right and wrong, who's acceptable and who isn't. We are quick to point to Jesus when it seems that Jesus agrees with our societal conventions, **but when Jesus threatens our economic comfort, when Jesus turns our preconceptions upside down, when Jesus upsets our long held societal conventions, like the Gerasenes, we find Jesus troubling, and we ask him to leave.**

And in our day and age, denied a physical Jesus to kick out of town, we just ignore what he stands for, we feign ignorance, we surround ourselves with other options, other claims of truth, different gospels to live by. **And I suspect it all boils down to fear.** When we ignore Jesus or just make Jesus one choice among many, **it's because we're afraid of what the costs of following Jesus might truly be.** It's because we are afraid of what Jesus might do to our carefully structured lives, which many of us have spent a lifetime cultivating. We don't want Jesus challenging our judgments, we don't want to be second guessed by a conscience that won't leave us alone. **"Better the devil you know, then the devil you don't," the old adage puts it. You'd think people would rather have no devils around at all. But the truth is that some would rather keep their old demons than have to deal with the change that Jesus demands.**

It's hard to follow Jesus. There are all sorts of reasons why. He asks too much of us, he is too radical for us. His claim of exclusivity is difficult to embrace in a pluralistic world. The uncertainty in terms of economic and social stability is too much to overcome. We're afraid. And you know what, Jesus understands. When the people of the country of the Gerasenes told Jesus to leave, he didn't argue with them, he didn't even condemn them. The text says that Jesus got into the boat and returned. He knew they were afraid. He knew that for many of them it was too sudden, too much, too soon. It would take a while for some to understand. **And my friends, the good news is that same patience and grace that Jesus showed to the Gerasene people, he shows to us.** It's hard to follow, but Jesus continues to invite us, and he's patient with us. **And thanks be to God, some do follow, you follow.**

But you know what's even harder than following Jesus? **What's even harder than following Jesus is proclaiming Jesus and what Jesus stands for when everyone else has told him to leave town.** The man whom Jesus had healed, he begged to follow Jesus, to go with him. And why wouldn't he? His life had been given back to him, but there was little life in that land for him to go back to. But Jesus said no, and he sent him away, saying, **return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.** And so, the man went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

I remember when I was first called here to RPC to be your minister. I was told that this congregation wanted to be a missional congregation but it became clear to me that both you and I had a lot of learning to do about what it means to be a missional church. What it means, in part, is to do what the healed man did. It means to go to our homes, to our

neighbourhoods, to our workplaces and our schools, to tell people about what Jesus has done for us. **To be missional means to go and bear witness to Jesus in a world that doesn't really know him, isn't predisposed to welcome him, won't receive him.** This is what the mission of the church is, to be the light on the hill, the salt that seasons, to be disciples who bear good news.

I wonder, though, whether in our proclaiming Jesus if we're able to articulate what different it makes to us to follow him? As a missional people, a missional congregation, we don't have to stand on a soapbox and shout at people, after all it's not about confrontation, but invitation, **but what if in our living, in our serving, in our loving, what if people are moved to ask us why we do what we do, why we are the kind of people we are, would we be able to articulate our faith, could we tell people why Jesus makes a difference, why Jesus makes all the difference? And if we can't, then what's all this about?**

Even harder than following Jesus is proclaiming Jesus and what Jesus stands for when everyone else has kicked Jesus out of town. And yet that's what Jesus would have us do.

In a world which is often all too comfortable with easy conventions and stereotypes, in a society which finds scapegoats handy to have around and in a culture where economic and social position means so much, Jesus sends us, his disciples, to challenge the injustices and the self-serving conclusions that we too often embrace. Whether it be fighting the prejudice of race, sex, gender, standing for the rights of the mentally challenged or handicapped, advocating for those who are unable to speak for themselves, helping the poor and hungry and homeless, **just as Jesus sent the healed man, so he send us.**

I have to tell you that leaving is difficult. I have wanted to serve a missional church and I give thanks that we have made strides in moving to become such a church. **It is the mission of the church to bear witness to God's saving love in Jesus Christ.** It is the mission of the church not to keep that good news to ourselves, but to tell others. **The church can't be about just protecting our own, making sure we survive, because if it is, we won't.** We won't survive if we don't tell others, if we don't have good news to share.

I've just spent the past 3 weeks in Toronto, getting oriented to my new position and also attending the recently concluded General Assembly of our denomination. It was a contentious gathering at times, with much debate around our direction and the challenges that continue to face us as the church. My new role as Principal Clerk in the PCC is about good process, making sure that we do everything "decently and in good order." But I hope it's also to help us find a bigger picture, a higher calling than that which we have been fighting about, and will continue to disagree about. We have a challenging future ahead of us. We are struggling with issues of identity, with LGBTQI people, with Indigenous people, with people of non-European background, who happen to be the fastest growing part of our denomination, and much more. Some people are not happy, some want to leave our denomination.

But it doesn't have to be this way, the trajectory of our future can be different. I think too many of us have been distracted from our primary purpose, our higher calling, which is to declare the love of God for all people in Jesus Christ, **a love that transforms, a love that heals, a love that changes everything about a life.** Before we are anything else, before we are defined by any other identity, **we are God's people, the baptized people of God's family, the children of God, the ones whom God loves and for whom God came to be one of us in our Lord, Jesus Christ.** As a denomination we need to focus more on that truth, on proclaiming that good news, **that Jesus changes everything,** that God's love in Jesus means that our lives have renewed meaning and purpose, that we can live without fear in proclaiming that love so that the poor can be lifted up, so that the hurting can be healed, so that the excluded can be welcomed, so that the oppressed can be liberated, so that all people who bear God's image can be loved and embraced as the beloved of God.

Now it's one thing to follow Jesus in church, among others who profess faith. **But even harder than following Jesus is following Jesus when it puts us against the flow, into situations where what Jesus proclaims isn't always welcomed or appreciated.** It means to speak out when it's easier to remain silent, It means stand up and stick your neck out when you're liable to get it chopped off. It means to challenge the status quo around economics and politics, even when it's not popular or even when it's not to our advantage. It means to work for justice, for healing, for peace, for dignity, for the vulnerable, when those things seem so far off and so hard to realize in a world which often doesn't seem to care, where people are so caught up only looking after themselves.

Why would we try to do something so difficult, so hard? Because, like the man in our text whose life Jesus completely changed, we too, my friends, have had our lives changed by Jesus. And if Jesus has changed our lives, won't we be like the man Jesus healed, willing to go where Jesus sends us, willing to do what Jesus commands us, willing to stay and live where we are, praising Jesus and sharing his good news?

My friends, I pray that our Lord Jesus would grant us, you and I, the strength and the joy to be his church and his people, to be his hands and his feet, his voice and his heart, blooming wherever God may plant us, to the glory and praise of God always.

And to God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen.