

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush

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Mark 5:1-20

The Gold Chains of Legion

This past Thursday, doing research for this sermon, Ian and I had lunch at Costco. To be honest, we actually ate a lot of things at Costco. We sampled some veggie burgers with Laughing Cow Swiss cheese, chips with a medium-spicy salsa, Ghiradelli mini chocolate brownies, thin slices of honey baked ham, and organic lemonade, to name just a few items. Then after spending \$100 in groceries, we each had a ¼ pound hot dog plus a 20 oz. soda fountain drink – a lunch that only cost us \$3.00 plus tax. Ian was quite impressed by the array of items you could buy in Costco, from the food we sampled to the giant, inflatable water slide that only cost \$750. It was a veritable temple of consumerism for card-carrying members seeking to buy stuff in bulk and then plop down to get an over-sized meal plus unlimited soda for \$3.21.

Now compare that experience in Costco with our gospel lesson - the story of Jesus' encounter with a demoniac living among the tombs of a city cemetery. At first glance there may appear to be no connection between a shopping trip to Costco and this 1st century exorcism. In fact, of all the stories about Jesus, the ones that seem most distant from our modern-day experiences are the stories about casting out demons. Yet think about the condition in which the demoniac existed. He was isolated, made triply unclean because he lived in a cemetery, near to a place where pigs were raised, and was believed to be possessed by a multitude of demons. He had no future; he had no hope; he had no name except "Legion" – a name referring to the thousand-fold battalion of demons that had taken up residence in his soul, giving him neither rest nor relief.

His story is not as uncommon as you might think. Lots of people lead lives of not-so-quiet desperation, who feel isolated, captive to their own demons and crazed desires, but unable to get things right on their own. Demon possession is an old term for a very modern reality; the same captivity once assigned to devils can now be called by the modern names of addiction to drugs or pornography or gambling, or the spiritual captivity to racism or prejudice, misogyny or anti-Semitism. There are lots of demons I could name in relation to this passage of the bible, but the evil spirits I wish to focus on today are the demons of failed finances and corrupt consumerism - hence this morning's connection between Costco and Christianity.

Remember how in the bible story the people begged Jesus to leave them alone after he cured the demoniac? I can almost hear the voices begging me not to talk about money from the pulpit. Church consultant Loren Mead has said that most congregations live with an unspoken rule: Clergy can talk a little about budgets and contributions to the church, and in return the members respond by making sure there is enough money to run the show. But this means that clergy both fail to give leadership concerning the financial life of their congregation and they nurture a climate that places little value on sound financial management. It means pastoral abdication of one of the most troubling dimension of modern social life.¹ As a result of this unholy bargain, we never talk in

church about finances as a spiritual matter, waiting until Monday morning to listen to Suze Orman teaching us to say, "Can I really afford that?" or hear Dr. Phil describe our bad financial habits before saying to us, "How's that working for you?"

Maybe Suze Orman and Dr. Phil are enough for some folks. But I am sure there are lots of people whose financial problems make them feel isolated and as captive to unholy demons as the man called Legion. If this is true in your life or true for someone you know, our faith invites us to hear a call from Christ to consciously serve a different master, one who is able to set you free so you can tell all your friends "how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy God has shown you." (Mark 5:19)

So let's talk a bit about money. I recently read a book called *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*. One of the first troubling things in this book is the fact that at least one out of five American Christians – 20% - gives literally nothing to church or nonreligious charities.² All of their money appears to be spent on themselves. Ouch! The book then details what percentage of income is given by various church groups, including Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Baptists and others. A 2001 survey suggests that most Christians only give away about 1.5-2% of their income. How much money does that amount to? Well, that is hard to say, because another troubling fact is that in many churches, about half of the money received comes from only 5% of the givers. So on average 5% of the congregation gives half the income while the remaining 95% make up the other half of the income.³ Now I did some quick math concerning the giving patterns here at ELPC. We received 258 pledges this year totaling about \$514,000. About half of that total comes from 40 pledges, which means for us the split is 15% give one half of our pledge income and the remaining 85% give the other half. We are blessed in that we do not have to rely on 2 or 3 families for the bulk of our pledged giving; however, it is also true that we do not shoulder the responsibility of supporting the church as equally as possible.

It's at this point of the sermon in which people begin to push back. Pastor, if I earned more money, I would give more to the church. Sadly, for most people that is not true. Statistically the higher the household income, the lower the percentage of income that is given away. And even though real income has risen over the past 50 years, the percentage of income given by American Christians has declined over the years.⁴

Since no one is interrupting me to confess how much money they have in their pockets right now and how grateful they are that I've pointed out they could increase their giving to the church, it is therefore appropriate to note two things. First, we all have a tremendous amount of discretionary income, much of which we spend on non-church items. For example, recent statistics point out that Americans annually spend \$28 billion on candy, \$24 billion on movie DVDs, \$45 billion in state lotteries, \$93 billion on soda and bottled water, \$100 billion on fast food, and \$288 billion on domestic travel and tourism. Let's look closer at one other statistic: Americans age 21 and older annually spend \$30 billion on alcoholic beverages. This means they spend \$175 more per year on alcohol than they give to church or charities.⁵

Second, yes, people could make wiser choices on how to spend their money. The recent economic downturn has forced all of us to look closely at discretionary spending and to try to live within the constraints of a budget. But I'm not here to give you financial advice; I'm here to talk about spiritual matters. Too many people feel captive to demoniac financial problems. They are embarrassed by the amount of debt they are carrying; they are frightened about losing their homes, terrified of losing their jobs, worried about how they can dig their way out of the hole they find themselves in. It is precisely this type of bondage that Christ came to break. The Spirit of the Lord casts out this type of captivity through enabling new lives of freedom, discipline, and a fresh commitment to what builds us up instead of what tears us down.

That demoniac of old lived in a world of triple uncleanness. He lived captive to demons, in a cemetery, near herds of pigs. We too can become captive to the demons of indebtedness and consumerism when they take over our lives. We too can find ourselves in places of the dead, where there is no thought or hope for the future. And all around us are unholy things – for the ancient Jews this was symbolized by herds of pigs; for modern Americans this can be seen in the herd mentality of rampant consumerism. It is the false spirit that says, Sit and have your discount meals at Costco or Sam's Club, while all around you are free samples to entice you to purchase their super-sized products. Go to Target or Wal-Mart to buy things on sale you didn't need in the first place, as well as to sign up for credit cards at the cash register that cut 10% off today's purchases hoping that your future buying will lead to long-term debt. To me there is something truly demoniac about all this; certainly it distracts us from where God would have us focus our attention and our resources.

So then, what is the gospel "good news"? **#1)** Jesus always takes the initiative. Jesus goes into the cemetery, into the places of death and despair where people have given up hope for a better future and offers them precisely that – a new beginning and a fresh horizon. Thanks be to God. **#2)** Jesus calls us by our name. Spiritual healing is never impersonal. Jesus calls us by name and offers us a new identity as children of God, something far more valuable than a high credit score or healthy bank account balance.

#3) Jesus isn't hesitant to send the demons of consumerism off into the pigs of unholy lifestyles. There will always be people and things anxious to get our money. In the ancient words of Joshua, we are to choose this day whom we will serve. Send off the demons of credit debt, wasteful purchases, super-sized portions, and sale prices on stuff that doesn't last into the herds of consumer hogs, and watch as they plunge to their demise over cliffs and sink beneath the waves of chaotic lifestyles. **#4)** Jesus calls us to act deliberately in all areas of our life, including our finances. By giving intentionally, not sporadically or out of convenience, but as a spiritual discipline sharing our financial first fruits, we stand upon a foundation of faith and works that will sustain us our whole life long.

Lastly, remember the wonderful words Jesus spoke to the healed man: "Go to your family, your friends. Show them who is the real master you now serve. Show them new priorities, new faith, an entirely new future, not of death but of life. Tell them how much

the Lord has done for you, and what mercy God has shown you.” This profession of faith doesn’t mean that you will win the lottery or that money concerns will never come your way. What it means is that all parts of your life, body and bank balances, spirit and savings accounts, now come under the Lordship of the one who alone can heal and offer lasting hope. In place of howling fits of rage or gold chains of financial woes, Christ offers a new life of discipline, generosity, of being clothed spiritually and financially once more in your own right mind.

In Mark’s story the ex-demoniac went back to his own town and told people how much Jesus had done for him. And everyone was amazed. May that spiritually, financially, personally be so for us this very day as well. Thanks be to God!

AMEN

¹ Quoted in Christian Smith & Michael Emerson, Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don’t Give Away More Money, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 73-74.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.