

June 23, 2019

TEXT: Luke 8:26–39

TITLE: Healing the Crowds

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

The dramatic story of Jesus healing the demoniac of Gerasene appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s gospel. When I say it is a “dramatic story,” I’m not referring to how this poor man lived in agony out in the cemetery or how Jesus cast out the demons into a herd of swine. No, the drama comes at the end of the story—when it describes how the man was healed, clothed and in his right mind, and once the crowds saw this, they were afraid. Even after they heard the details of Jesus’ healing of this man, scripture says “they were seized with great fear” and asked Jesus to leave. Somehow they had gotten used to having a naked, mentally disturbed man living outside their city limits in the cemetery, but as soon as he was healed and sitting calmly beside Jesus, then they were seized with fear! It’s like the old saying: Sometimes we prefer the devil we know over the change we don’t know.

As memorable as this story is, it seems hard to relate to. Part of the reason is because we don’t have experience with demoniacs nowadays. So I began to wonder what if our attention wasn’t focused on the odd behavior of this man called Legion. What if he wasn’t running around and speaking to Jesus with the voice of demons? What if he was the opposite—silent, passive, even catatonic? It was this idea that led me to the 1990 Penny Marshall film “Awakenings.” As I mentioned, it is based on the true experiences of Dr. Oliver Sacks, who in the 1960s worked in a ward of catatonic patients, victims of an encephalitis outbreak from the 1920s. Sacks discovered that a medicine normally given to Parkinson’s patients, called Levodopa, could literally awaken these unresponsive people. Miraculously they could move, talk, and once again be “clothed and in their right minds” to borrow the biblical language.

Remembering how the Gerasenes reacted with fear, I re-watched parts of the film to see how people in Sacks’ medical ward responded to these modern healings. There was some initial confusion when suddenly an entire room of formerly catatonic patients were up and moving around, talking, demanding things, trying to make sense of the lost decades of their life. One aide quipped that he liked them better the other way! But invariably there were scenes of joy—such as when Leonard’s mother was finally able to talk to her son after 40 years. No one was seized with fear. No one insisted Dr. Sacks go away forever.

But in the second clip I showed, you saw how Leonard’s simple request to reclaim a bit of his independence—to take a walk by himself—was denied by the hospital board. Sitting there with their clinical skepticism and presumptions of knowing what is best, the doctors resembled the Gerasene crowd—shutting down the miracle they’d just witnessed, staying in control even if it cost a child of God his rightful freedom. Dr. Sacks—well, he was a disruptive presence. Better just to live with the demons we know than trust the change that is offered.

It sounds counter-intuitive, but too often we fear the cure more than we fear the disease. In little and big ways, we build up coping mechanisms for things that are broken in our lives—broken in ourselves, broken in our relationships, broken in where we work or how we live together in this world. We tell ourselves it is just something we have to put up with—something best left alone and tolerated. I'm hesitant to name examples, because it will be different things for each of us: addictive behaviors, abusive behavior at work or at home, prejudices inflicted on us because of our race, gender, sexuality, or age, self-doubts and anxieties that never leave us in peace. As different as all these situations may be, what they share in common is a loss of hope. We give up believing things could be different, which leads us to fear the change that might well heal us. Just as in the movie, for 40 years loved ones lay in catatonic states with no improvement imaginable, until Dr. Sacks and L-dopa awoke not only the patients, but also awoke a sense of hope. Of all the gifts of faith, that is surely the greatest of all.

For a moment, let's move from the personal to the communal. Paradoxically if we can overcome our fear about hoping for big changes in our world, we can begin to take the steps for small changes in our own life. I recently read a review of a book with this long title: *Clear and Present Safety—The World Has Never Been Better and Why That Matters to Americans*. The world has never been better—really? Well, it's true that since the 1960s, life expectancies in America have increased by almost a decade. And we are in the midst of the longest economic expansion ever recorded. Why is this good news hard to believe? Partly because of “threat inflation”—the daily diet of fearmongering coming at us from all directions. Exaggerating threats increase power for politicians, gains profits for media companies and defense contractors, and raises publicity for all types of social activists.¹ I've literally had to counsel some church members to watch less MSNBC because it was making them fearful and keeping them awake at night.

By inflating the threats around us, we not only end up with bloated military budgets and dangerous brinkmanship in our nation's foreign policy (such as is currently the case with Iran), we end up doubting we can ever actually fix the problems we face. We tell ourselves it's just not possible. We lose hope. Yet why surrender to fear and accept the demons around us? Why must we believe that America as a nation has to execute people and rely on the unjust, barbaric practice of capital punishment? Why are we afraid to imagine a world that no longer uses fossil fuels, or a world that has banned all nuclear weapons? Why are we so afraid to talk about reparations for the lingering national sin of slavery? Why are we so hesitant to establish a floor beneath which no one in America falls by creating a Universal Basic Income? Sure, these are not easy options, but they are not impossible. Why should we be like the doctors smoking their cigarettes around the conference table, cynically afraid to trust that Leonard could leave the hospital unattended. Why are we afraid to believe that something big—even miraculous—is possible in our world today? We have nothing to fear but fear itself. Pushing back on threat inflation, working for what you can't see but what you trust and hope is possible with God's help—to me that's what it means to walk by faith.

At the end of the Luke 8 story, the Gerasenes are full of fear and insist Jesus leave them at once. The man formerly known as Legion begged to go with Jesus, but he was

given these simple instructions: *Go back home. Tell how much God has done for you.* By healing this man, Jesus disrupted the status quo. Things weren't great when the crazy man ran around the cemetery—things weren't great when for 40 years the beloved son lay in a catatonic state—things aren't great as for decades we put Americans on death row, we deny citizenship to Dreamers, we roll up our windows as the homeless walk past our cars at busy intersections—but we've figured out how to live with these things. Yet Christ didn't come so we could simply live with things as they are, especially things that diminish and demean the image of God planted in every one of us. Jesus cast out the demons and, even more, he sent the ex-demoniac to live in the midst of the Gerasenes, so that his healing could be a catalyst for their healing.

Daniel Hill tells the story of a young idealistic friend who went to work for several months with Mother Theresa in Calcutta. When his time there was over, he struggled with the thought of returning home to Philadelphia, leaving behind the people and needs he'd witnessed there in India. Mother Theresa wisely said to him, "Calcuttas are everywhere if only we have eyes to see. Go home and find your Calcutta."²

Mother Theresa is right. "Calcuttas are everywhere. Go find one." Sometimes following Jesus means working right here at home. Remember how Jesus sent the healed man back into the city to declare all God has done for him. Then look around for these good souls today. Be willing to share your own testimonies of freedom and redemption. These are today's dramatic stories of healing and hope, and they are the antidote to despair and cynicism. By the grace of God, our catatonic states of indifference are being disrupted and we are awakened at last. We are the ones Christ longs to heal—even more so than the demoniac. Now is the acceptable hour—for us, for others, for the world. Now is our time of healing. There's nothing to be afraid of. If God is for us, who can be against us?

¹ Jonathan Rauch, "Feeling Bad When Life Is Good," Review of Clear and Present Safety, NY Times Book Review, June 16, 2019, p. 14.

² Daniel Hill, White Awake, p. 166.