

# Sermons at Christ Church

## Love, Re-Imagined

Pentecost II

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Jesus, please set my bound heart free, Let not this world my prison be, Where fear and shame would pull me down. To suffocate and cause me to drown. 'Tis my soul that it may soar. Heavy, fettered, chained no more. So You can lead me to the hills. A way from where 'perfection' kills. Amen.

This gospel story is such a powerful story of healing, worth and affirmation. Jesus and his friends had arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had been overrun by demons met him. He had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted "What have you to do with me, Jesus Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him.

Here was a man who couldn't live among his kinsfolk. Here was a man who couldn't be restrained by anyone, not even the chains with which he was shackled. What happened to him? What caused him to be overrun by demons? How long has he been in this condition? How long has he suffered? The same story is in the gospel of Mark, and in that version, Mark recounts a man who howls all day and night, and then mutilate and beat himself with stones. This man is beyond saving. Demons.

Here comes Jesus. The man who by his healing affirms the intrinsic value of Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, male or female- whether they are sane or not, whether they've been overrun by demons or not and whether they deserve to be healed or not. The man who affirms for us the idea that no one is unclean enough to be out of God's gracious reach, and that no matter how desperate and hopeless our situation may be, he always walks to the Eastside of town, he always walks to the Westside of town, the place where no one wants to go, and offers God's healing and mending touch.

Demons. The honest truth is we all have our demons. And those demons can be so powerful that they lead us on to dangerous paths, destroy our lives and that of our loved ones. We are not talking about some esoteric beings but real demons that tear our lives into pieces and shreds them.

Guess what? Overdose and addiction is the number one cause of death in Americans under 50. Almost 15% of us will develop a substance abuse issue at some point in our lives. Over half of us have a close relative

suffering from dependency, addiction or abuse. One in every five adults has a prescription for opioids, and almost 70% of all drug related deaths involved opioids.

These are not other worldly characters. Listen to Paul “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” The struggle Paul references is not anything esoteric or abstract, it is something real, it is present in our lives and it is destroying lives. Because of depression, addiction, some chemical imbalance or anger, some of us can crawl into our beds and wet our sheets with tears for days. Uncontrollable panic can attack us without warning. Pent up anger has reduced us into zombies who cannot enjoy the beautiful gift of each other. We are so angry with everyone over nothing.

You all know that I love fried chicken. And so a few days ago one of our parishioners invited me to lunch at a fried chicken joint. When we arrived, we got a seat for ourselves and then proceeded to the counter to place our orders. At the counter was a man and a woman who were also clients. They didn’t know each other. Both of them had earlier purchased a drink mixture of lemonade and ice tea. The man had asked for a refill, and gotten it. But when the woman asked for a refill, the same person who a few moments ago had given the man a refill told the woman that they do not serve refills. The woman was surprised. But you just gave this man a refill so why are you denying my request? She protested. To cut a long story short, she gave up on her request for a refill and then took a seat while she waited for her order. The man who had earlier received his refill sat at the other side of the restaurant, far away from the woman. All of a sudden, just out of nowhere, this man and this woman begin to go at each other. They didn’t know each other but they were so comfortable calling each other unprintable names. The parishioner, among many things simply said “Father Manny, this is what happens when people are angry.” Yes, but that kind of anger is a symptom of a much bigger problem which remains to be solved.

Anger, fear or grief can lead us to the darkest tombs. Sometimes it's impossible to escape or control these mighty storms or principalities, so we might try to control or escape other things instead. We will stop eating or eat too much. We may not have the energy to move, or we might exercise or work or shop too much. We find avenues where we can simply focus our attention without having to deal with the fire that is burning within us.

There appears to be no appropriate avenue by which we can channel our deepest thoughts and fears. And even if those avenues were open to us, we still question their relevance and suitability, is someone listening to me? Does someone really care about me?

These demons, principalities or powers render us hopeless and depressed. They make us lose our sense of self-worth and dignity. Not only do they deceive us into thinking that no one cares about us, but that we are not loveable enough to be loved. The sad part is we may not necessarily see these demons but we undoubtedly feel their effects on our lives and those of our loved ones.

Demons are destructive powers which can only be comprehended in personal terms. They are characterized by their pleasure in tormenting. There's an old Jewish hope that states that when the Messiah comes these tormenting spirits will disappear from the earth, and people will recover their health and will be able to live reasonable lives again.

And when the Messiah came among us, the first thing that people discovered in Jesus was his healing power. Those who came into contact with him were revealed as being sick or possessed like the man who is the subject of today's gospel story. And so out of the corners into which they had been forced, out of the wilderness to which they had been banished, out of the shadows into which they had crept, out of the tombs to which they had been ostracized, the sick and the possessed emerge, and try to be near him.

See, in the neighborhood of Jesus men and women reveal themselves, not as people who fulfill the Greek ideal of healthy mind in a healthy body, but as people who are sick, possessed, suffering and in need of help. In the neighborhood of Jesus, people do not show themselves from the sunny side but from the sides that are the dark and shadowed. In the neighborhood of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles do not come as being full, rather they come as being empty desiring to be made full, they come as being broken, desiring to be made whole.

And so the man who was possessed showed himself to be who he was-a man who had been beaten down, a man who needed healing. In the context of faith, healings are signs of the new creation and the rebirth of life. What this man sought is what we seek-rebirth. What this man sought is what we seek- a new creation, for we need as much healing as he did.

Hear him, what are you to do with me Jesus, son of David? Jesus' miraculous healing belong within the context of his proclamation of the immanence of God's kingdom. That is why he encouraged the healed man to go and tell what God has done for him-go and proclaim Go's kingdom. Like the apostle Paul, go and proclaim God's kingdom of mercy, the kingdom where our faith is our only justification.

When God assumes power over his creation, the demons retreat. When the living God comes and indwells His creation, every creature will be filled with his eternal vitality. Jesus does not bring the kingdom of God only in words that awaken faith, he also brings it in the form of healings which restore health.

Go and tell what God has done for you. Jesus said. What God has done for you lately may not be in the cacophony of noise in your life, it is in the assuring presence of the still small voice-I am here to help you overcome. I am here to heal and transform you. Amen.