

A sermon
Unraveling of the mind: Jesus heals Legion, a man possessed by demons
Mark 5:1-20
At Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, Oregon
By Rev. Peter J. Blank
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Today marks the last day of our “Unraveled” sermon series. The theme of “unraveling” has seemed divinely timed, given all that’s going on in our world. Week by week, the stories have touched closely on so many things that have been affecting our own community. And today’s theme seems well-timed given some of the concerns and experiences I’ve been hearing around the community about mental health and wellness, care-giving for seniors and hospitalized folks who are feeling isolated. All of us are weary of the ways that the aftermath of the pandemic continues to throw up barriers to our human need to socialize and be present *with* each other, as well as being present *to* each other.

I think that once again, as in the scene of our reading from Mark, the dominant emotion—the prevailing mental state—is one of FEAR. There’s the man’s fear, and the disciples fear, and the fear of the townsfolk.

“Legion”, as the man identified himself, is a social outcast. He doesn’t fit very neatly in society because his mind is unraveling. He hears voices—too many to count. Legions of voices. Each one assaulting him constantly with fears and self-loathing so overwhelming that he becomes violent even toward himself, howling and self-harming, bruising himself with stones “night and day”, according to Mark. His mental illness makes those around him feel unsafe, uncertain of how to engage him—except to lock him up in a dark place. Which is why he’s out in the area where they buried the dead.

No doubt, those who approached him were fearful of his violence, his howling, his thrashing about as he worked to rid himself of the torments that so possessed him they became like personalities unto themselves.

And the afflicted man, the “demoniac”, would surely have feared and loathed those who approached him. Because the only ones who came near, did so only to wrestle him back into chains and into the tombs. What mind could possibly hold together under those circumstances?

When he sees Jesus stepping out of the boat and beginning to move in his direction, there is an immediate recognition of the Messiah’s power, and a simultaneous act of submission and expression of hope as the afflicted man pleads for mercy. Mark tells us that the man rushed toward Jesus and as he fell on his knees, he shouted, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg of you by God, do not torment me!” (Mark 5:7)

Fight-or-flight impulses would have been entirely natural under the circumstances. But Jesus does not respond with a fear-driven need to flee or to dominate, or torment, or otherwise dehumanize one who is obviously deeply troubled and profoundly troubling. “I beg of you by

God, *do not torment me!*” Legion pleaded.

Have you noticed we, human beings, when we perceive another person or people as a threat to our ego, self-importance, personal security, or way of being, will frequently respond by attempting to dehumanize the threat? We torment them in one way or another that seeks to diminish the humanity in them?

I think for many people, it’s not even conscious or necessarily calculated; they just do what they’ve seen modeled by others.

When physical force isn’t an effective option as a means to debase the other, we may resort to verbal, or psychological techniques. Like mockery and insults. Name-calling. Twisting truths, spreading rumors, or outright falsehoods. Or, we may work to undermine the others’ sense of confidence in their own grasp of reality by denying, ignoring, or actively suppressing the existence of demonstrable facts. And, by not calling the other by their given or chosen name, refusing to dignify the person with the acknowledgement that they possess a meaningful identity. All of these techniques are subtle but effective methods of undermining the dignity and humanity of another. These techniques were used in this election by politicians.

The people of Gerasene had long referred to the tormented man as “the demoniac.” It was an easy way of distancing their humanity from *his* existence, referring to him as one not possessing a name but instead known by the most feared or threatening aspect of his lived experience. (Or, *their* experience of his life.)

Jesus was never driven by fear, nor by a need to dominate. And so, he looks the man in the eyes and asks him, “What is your name?”

“My name is Legion,” the man responds, acknowledging the countless torments that have come to possess even his own self-understanding, “for we are many.” And then they begged Jesus not to send them out of the country. Spotting a herd of swine grazing nearby, Legion asked to be allowed to go and take possession of the pigs instead.

A person seeking to assert dominance might have felt threatened by the implicit power play in the claim, “*we are many*”—especially given this guy’s reputation for breaking chains and overpowering others. But Jesus’ relationships were not guided by a need to dominate; the power that allowed *him* to triumph even over aggressors was grounded in God—who is Love. As Love grounded and guided him, Jesus responded to the man with love. He granted the request, and the man was dispossessed of all that had tormented him for so long, casting it all on an unsuspecting herd of swine.

Now, to the disciples or any other Jewish person, this may not have seemed like a big problem—because pigs were considered unclean. So, allowing the “legion” demonic spirits to abandon a child of God and instead take possession of a bunch of unclean animals probably made sense to them. But it was certainly distressing to the pig owners, whose income just disappeared over the side of the cliff!

I don't have a good answer as to why that seemed acceptable—though, it seems to me that a healthy community that truly cared for each member would find a way to redress the financial hardship of those who lost their herds and livelihood. Especially when it meant that another one of their community was also being restored to mental health and wholeness. This entire scene represents a lesson about our call to respond to the plight of other people, and our different ways of being unwell.

One thing I can say is that the dignity and humanity of the one formerly known as Legion was restored. And that's because Jesus engaged the man with love; he acknowledged his humanity, listened to his plea, and treated him as a whole person.

Curiously (but also, not surprisingly), that threatened people. Mark's story continues that when the people came to check out what had happened, they found the man "clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid." [Mark 5:16] And all the people began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. A picture of that is on our bulletin this morning.

What were they afraid of?

FEAR. Fear is a highly effective unraveling tool, isn't it? Especially when we become isolated, the mind can become completely unspooled by fears that can wreak havoc. What are some of the fears our society is grappling with today?

What can we do about it? As Christ's hands and feet and Body active in the world today, how might we in the Church help to heal the experience that so many are having of mental unraveling, the fear and anxiety that accompanies so much of what's going on in the world today?

It's crucial to remember in difficult times that, if you are experiencing fragile mental health or if you or someone you know is falling apart, you are loved and you are not alone. Jesus did not judge Legion, or dismiss their fears and anxieties. Legion cried out to Jesus to have mercy on him (we need to cry out when we need help!), and Jesus listened. With his response, he assured the tormented man of his humanity, dignity, and belovedness as a child of God.

If you need a listening ear, please call the church office, or text or email me, or call another member of the church. This is how we experience and share the strength of Christ's spirit as members of the same body. This is how we overcome the demonic force of fear—which so often grows like a monster in isolation: as we reach out with love, either to receive the expressed need for connection from another, or to extend an expression of love to others whether they've announced a need for compassion or not.

May Christ so empower us to overcome our fears, to know that we are loved, accepted, cherished despite our human frailty, and may we share the Love that strengthens us with others ... for the long haul.