

**“A Hope beyond Ourselves”**  
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**Mark 5:1-20**

It was in the region of the Gerasenes that Jesus saw him; that man living among the tombs. They say he was a demoniac, crazy, absolutely crazy beyond the community's ability or desire to include him in their life. So they banished him to the community's cemetery, a desolate, lonely place of death for he was beyond hope.

I don't know how Jesus wound up at the local cemetery, but Jesus does have a way of always going to the edge, to those places of deep human suffering, somehow finding those persons whose suffering no one else seems to notice. Jesus startles us by where he goes. He also startled that poor Gerasene demoniac.

When he saw Jesus coming he cried out to him, “What have I done that you have come to visit me? Please, please, don't torment me.....can you not see that I am already tormented by a legion of forces?”

I wonder what tormented that brother who lived among the tombs in Gerasene? To simply say that he was afflicted by mental illness is to escape the fact that this is a story of healing filled with symbolism. As serious as mental illness is, there is even more than that to this story. Biblical scholars agree that this brother embodies the suffering of an entire community.

He lived in a pagan land, under Roman domination. It doesn't take long to realize that he had absorbed unto himself the anxiety of a people under social, economic, political and religious oppression. He lives among the tombs, totally out of control, often hurting

himself and desecrating the resting place of the dead through his very presence. His only human contact occurs as persons come to bury or remember their loved ones who have died. And these he frightens away. Though living, he is treated as if he were one of the dead. He was tormented in body, and soul and spirit, and he begs Jesus to not add to his torment.

But Jesus has come not to add to human torment, but to free us from all that torments us. Jesus comes to free us from all the lifeless tombs of our lives. He comes to free us from death that we may have life. And, so he heals Legion, the demoniac, of all that torments him and gives him life. With one touch of the mercy of Christ Jesus, that Gerasene demoniac, Legion, our brother, went from being a crazy, lost soul, living all alone smack in the middle of death, to having his mind and life restored to him. Praise God!

You would think that those in the community from which Legion had come would also have been praising God. But praises were not the word that spread throughout that community. Instead fear and reproach spread like wildfire.

The community came and gathered among the tombs. Oh, how people love to chase the ambulance. How we love to check out the rumors and the latest scandal, and it was scandalous! Jesus had taken the legion of torments and sufferings of the poor Gerasene demoniac and sent them into a large herd of swine that was feeding on the hillside.

Afflicted and confused the swine had rushed down the steep bank of the hillside into the belly of the sea and drowned. As they gathered the people could still hear the echo of the stampeding and the squealing of the swine, the terrible splash of water as they hit the sea, and then the silence.....A silence filled with the message that a dramatic change had just come..... not only for Legion but for all of them. Life would never be the same.

Men and women, young people and children all came to see this dramatic change; before them sat Legion, no longer naked, but clothed, and no longer insane but in his right mind. Did those people rejoice and praise God for the wonderful miracle of change and hope that had just occurred? But of course not! Who in their right mind wants change??!! They had gotten used to Legion.....gotten used to ignoring him and mistreating him; they had gotten used to talking badly about him, and gotten used to cursing him for being a burden to their conscience and an eyesore in their community. And the herd of swine.....in sending the legion of torments into them and leading them to their death, did Jesus not know that he had just disrupted the economy of their whole community.....this demoniac wasn't worth it! As they say here in my native Texas, Heck No, they didn't praise Jesus. They asked him to leave! I am reminded of the response that I so often hear these days when Jesus comes among us and heals the legion of torments and suffering of the immigrants who sojourn in this world.

On this day immigrants all over the globe are suffering as they seek escape from religious oppression, and political oppression, and the oppression of poverty. In the area where I serve a desert swallows up hundreds of men, women and children every year as they travel from the south to the north in order to feed and clothe and provide shelter for their families. A quick study of the economic realities that force persons from the south to immigrate to the north shows that U.S. wants and desires far exceeding our needs has left our brothers and sisters in the south living in dire poverty.

The manner in which the southern border of this country has over the last few years been controlled has led immigrants coming into the U.S. to cross the border in great numbers through the Arizona desert. It is almost 60 miles of desert where the temperatures can

reach over 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the daytime. Often these immigrants run out of water and food in the desert. They become disoriented and lost. Their feet blister and swell until they no longer fit in their shoes. Through the lack of water and the exposure to the elements, their internal organs begin to shut down as their brains fry and quit functioning properly and like the Gerasene demoniac, they go mad. It happens in a matter of a few days. Hundreds upon thousands of men, women, and children have died on the southern border of this country, because they seek bread and hope.

I am so very proud of United Methodists who have been caring for the immigrant on the border, providing a bit of water and a bit of care. Others have been advocating for comprehensive immigration reform. Thanks be to God for all of you. But there are also those among us who write to me as a bishop of the church and say, “Shame on you! Shame on you for supporting the giving of water to those immigrants in the desert! Don’t you dare use a penny of my money for caring for those immigrants! They aren’t worth it. If you do, I’ll withhold my offerings. What kind of an American are you that you would support those foreigners in breaking our U.S. laws?”

Oh, my brothers and my sisters, why, why, why would we want to leave anyone to die in the desert? The southern desert of this country has become our own Gerasene cemetery to which we have banished those whom Jesus would remind us are our brothers and our sisters. These immigrant men, women, young people and children are beloved of God just as you and I are. And if you happen to have a conversation with an immigrant brother or an immigrant sister they will tell you that God is their strength, and Christ Jesus is their faithful companion.

I want to be a responsible citizen in the country where I live, but even more than that, so much more than that, I want to be a faithful citizen of the reign of God; that holy reign that has come and is yet coming; that holy reign where Jesus alone is Lord. Jesus is not an American. Nor is he a German or a Filipino, or a Liberian. He is not even simply a Nazarene. For Jesus is so much more than that. Nor is Jesus beholden to U.S.

immigration policies or the immigration policies of any nation. For Jesus is so far above all of that. Jesus is the Son of the Most High God who comes proclaiming good news to all who are tormented by the sins of this world. Jesus is the Son of the Most High God who comes announcing that the reign of God has arrived and life will never be the same!

There are hundreds of thousands of immigrants and refugees all over this world suffering a legion of torments on this very day. May God have mercy upon them, and may God have mercy on our souls. They are unfortunately not the only ones who join our poor brother the Gerasene demoniac, Legion, living in the death pits of this world. Poverty and the torment, suffering and unnecessary death it brings, affects too many of our brothers and sisters in Africa, in Asia, in Europe, in the Middle East, in Latin America and the Caribbean and even in North America. A global economic machine that continues to reap the very best of God's good gifts for the few, leaving a great majority of God's children only subsisting or living on the edge of death is today shaping our communities and lives. But there is also the element of racism in this global economic scheme that daily takes us closer to death. I cannot preach from this pulpit made from the remains of a tree torn down by Hurricane Katrina and not remember how impossible it has been for the United States to respond to the basic human needs of those persons most affected by Hurricane Katrina in this country. I cannot help but believe that the fact that those most severely

affected by Hurricane Katrina are in their majority Black, has affected our public willingness to respond with the kind of deep compassion that is necessary so that life can be restored in this area where even after all this time, death's gray pallor still looms close. The poverty in this world and the suffering it causes is an issue of economics gone astray, and it is an issue of racism. But it is also an issue of classism that affects people of all colors and cultures around the globe. Today the poverty faced by those who like Legion though alive are forced to abide among the dead, is cruel, complicated, complex, and so very difficult to counter. As United Methodists we have committed together to overcome poverty in community with the poor. I'm not sure.....I am not sure that you and I can overcome poverty, not even in community with the poor. I'm not sure we are smart enough, or disciplined enough, or compassionate enough to overcome poverty. But I do not lose hope, and I pray that you will not lose hope for there is a hope beyond ourselves, namely Jesus the Christ who is smart enough, and disciplined enough and compassionate enough, and loving enough, and powerful enough, to work with us and through us to overcome poverty and the legion of troubles it brings!

When our Council of Bishops met in Mozambique, Africa, in 2006 I saw that precious hope beyond ourselves; I saw Christ Jesus at work through his disciples. One Sunday while in Mozambique, we the members of the Council of Bishops were sent forth in teams to visit the United Methodist churches in that wonderful land. I went with a team that was taken to a small developing community about 45 minutes from Maputo where we were meeting. We arrived and soon realized that we had been sent to a fairly new church start. In fact the church building had only three walls up and the roof was but a mere blue tarp. The church, the body of Christ, however, was standing tall!

Worship was joyful and full, and the witness was strong. These were solid disciples of Christ Jesus. In fact we were half way through the service before we realized that the pastor was missing. The pastor's father had died and so the congregation had sent him home to attend to his family and to his own grief. The laity had proceeded on for it was Sunday, the Lord's Day!

But in that wonderful and rich service of worship, the poverty in which our United Methodist brothers and sisters live did not go unnoticed. It was visible in that community of faith and all around us: a father dead much too young because of poverty; a child orphaned because its mother lacked adequate and very basic medical care; a neighborhood without water, or electricity or schools. Poverty was obvious and clear to us, but the people, the people called Methodists in that place had a hope beyond themselves.

After worship and before a feast of fish and legumes and ripe bananas eaten under a gorgeous cashew tree, lay leaders of this community of faith took us to where they had first been formed as a church. It was up the road and deeper into that developing community.

When we got there, there was even less of a building than where we had worshiped. In fact all we saw was three walls and a roof of straw. When we looked at our Mozambiquen brothers and sisters as we stood on that plot of land with that simple straw structure they were all smiling. We weren't sure what their smiles meant so we asked, "Are you going to sell this property in order to finish your building on your new site?" Upon hearing our question their smiles fell from their faces and they looked at each other with a certain befuddlement, and then they gently said to us, "No. We are not going

to sell this property.” And then with great passion they said, “We’re going to build a school right here. And after the children are out of school we will have a clinic here. And over there,” they said as they pointed to one small water faucet, “over there we will provide water for all those who live here. We moved from this place but we cannot abandon our brothers and sisters, they need us!”

We were amazed by what we saw and heard; the poor helping the poor because they have been filled by a hope beyond themselves. Christ Jesus has filled them, changed their lives, and they are indeed praising and thanking God through worship and good works. Then just two weeks ago I saw that hope beyond ourselves yet again; among the awful tombs of poverty and despair I saw Christ Jesus touching the life of a boy with golden hair and white skin. A telephone call to our conference office one afternoon beckoned me to see Christ Jesus about his mighty work. “Could the boy come to the bishop’s confirmation retreat without a signed permission slip from his mother?” asked this boy’s pastor from the other end of the telephone line. This boy has no father, and his pastor and he had just spent the entire day looking for his mother by driving up and down the avenue where all the cheap motels in their city are found. But they did not find her and so there was no one to sign his confirmation retreat form. Could he come anyway?

When I arrived at that confirmation retreat I saw him immediately, this boy with golden hair and white skin, the spitting image of brother Legion, with rotten teeth, weathered skin, and an untrusting look in his eyes. During one of the meals that weekend I sat with him and he told me about his life. He had lived in poverty all of his life. He had never known his father, and his mother is a drug addict. He had been reared by his grandparents, but his grandfather had died some years ago and he had buried his

grandmother just days before, leaving him with no family.. I was so moved by this boy's life story that I found myself wanting to take him home, but someone had already done that.

Two young people, a brother and a sister, from one of our United Methodist churches and his friends, had convinced their family to take him in for was this not what Jesus would expect of them! What an amazing hope beyond ourselves; Jesus who stirs within us that holy desire to do that which is good out of love for God and love for others.

I trust in this hope beyond ourselves; I trust in Jesus to help us overcome poverty in community with the poor. But allow me to address one final concern. That concern is fear. I am sure that if it isn't already happening right now as we think about overcoming poverty, that it will happen as soon as we get home. We will become fearful; fearful of the enormity of the task, fearful of becoming overwhelmed by its demands, fearful of losing what we have and being left without, and even fearful of those who are poor around us; fearful of the Legions of the world.

I remember as a child how fearful I would become when our pastor happened to preach a sermon about Legion, that Gerasene demoniac who lived among the tombs. It didn't help a bit that my family and I lived on a farm called Cemetery Settlement because we were right on the edge of the local cemetery. So when I would hear a sermon about Legion it would be a few nights before I could again sleep without fear. And maybe this morning we are all feeling a bit of fear. But I would say to you people of The United Methodist Church as I say to myself – GROW UP!

Let us grow up and quit hiding behind fear; let us be mature Christians, disciples of Jesus Christ, trusting in him, but also confessing that the greater part of our fear is probably that

we may be complicit in the poverty of the world. Confessing that The United Methodist Church, particularly many of us who live in the U.S., is wealthy beyond what we deserve or need. And, also confessing that we do not always use our resources as God would have us use them. I believe that growing up and being faithful followers of Christ Jesus along with a good dose of confession will free us from our fears.

But even more, I do so believe in that hope beyond ourselves. I believe in Christ Jesus who WILL overcome poverty in community with the poor. And I pray that we will be with him when that day comes.