

Things Jesus Taught Us (5)

By
Philip Gulley

Read Luke 8:26-39

When I was about ten years old, a family moved in down the street from us. They had five feral children, kids who weren't raised, they just kind of grew up. **One of the kids was particularly mean, just tough as old leather.** I'd walk by their home every morning and afternoon and hardly a day passed that that kid wouldn't see me coming down the sidewalk, fly out their front door, and come after me. **I'd take off running, but I was never fast enough, and that kid would tackle me and start pounding on me, just knocking me down to dust.** It was like that every day for months, that kid just beating the thunder out of me. Boy, she was tough.

I finally worked up the nerve to tell my parents. My father wasn't very sympathetic. He said, "That's probably her way of telling you she likes you. That's her way of showing love."

I asked him if I could show her a little love back. He said, "Don't you hit a girl. Gentlemen don't hit girls."

My mom was more practical. She told me to avoid her, to go up a block, go the long way around and steer clear of her house, which is what I did.

Eventually, that's what everyone did. Nobody walked down that street anymore, not even the adults, because the family was so volatile you never knew what they'd do. **It was like stumbling into a nest of vipers.** Their neighbors moved. Nobody wanted to live anywhere near them.

So here's this man bound in chains living in the graveyard outside of Gadara. **He's so troubled and mean and vicious that the only way to explain that much evil being in one person was to say he was filled with demons.** There were no police officers to call, so the neighbors got themselves organized and ganged up on him, wrapped him in chains, drug him to the graveyard, and tethered him to a tree like a mad dog. **It's a wonder they just didn't kill him, but maybe his family had lived in the town for a long time and his mother and father were thought well of and were just sick about their boy, so the neighbors showed mercy.** "That could be our kid one day," they probably thought. "We won't kill him, but he can't live among us either." **So it sounds hard, but it could be a mercy.**

Communities have always had a way of isolating evil. "You don't go by that house", I remember my mother telling me. "You stay away from those people," I tell my boys.

We had teenage boys skateboarding around the courthouse in the evenings a few years ago. **Long hair and black shirts and loud music.** I'd grown up with their parents, who were much the same way, so when they glared at me, I just asked them how their mom and dad were doing and they'd slink away embarrassed. They had apparently told their friends they were orphans.

People got all nervous and complained to the town board, who had a skateboard park built for them. Put a big fence around it and now all those skateboarders are together in one place, fenced in. **We isolated what we feared, you see.** We do that all the time. Except we call them slums, or barrios, or prisons, or the other side of the tracks, or Iraq. **Isn't that why we're there?** So we can keep that evil over there and it doesn't come over here? That's what they've told us anyway.

So here's this man bound in chains living in the graveyard outside of Gadara. **We've got him where we can keep an eye on him.** Jesus visits the town and the Chamber of Commerce president is showing him around, pointing out the nice homes and the places of historical interest and the new factory, and Jesus says, "Where's your graveyard?"

"Oh, you don't want to go there. Besides, it's time for lunch. We're having a luncheon for you."

I don't know that it happened exactly like this, I'm just trying to get the picture in my head.

Thinking how we try to control and manage the evil around us, so that it's always out there somewhere else in someone else and never within us. But Jesus wants to see the graveyard and off he goes. **He sees this man straining at the chains, and he asks, "What's your name?"** In the olden days, they believed if you knew someone's name, you had power over them. That's why Adam got to name the animals and had dominion over them. **The man said, "My name is Legion."** Luke's taking a swipe at Rome here. *Legion* was the name of Caesar's army. So he's equating Caesar's army with demonic power. **The Bible is not above mixing religion and politics.**

The demons recognize Jesus. It's funny, all through the Bible the disciples never quite understood who Jesus was, but the demons always knew him. **I guess that means that people who we think should know Jesus don't always, and the folks we think wouldn't know him, do.** But the demons plead with Jesus not to be cast into the abyss, so he casts them into a nearby herd of pigs, who then plunge down the hill, into the lake, and drown. **Pigs, of course, were seen as ritually unclean, so they were kept in the graveyard, too.** Couldn't eat them, couldn't touch them. Now the pigs have gone and drowned in Gadara's water supply. And the people of Gadara ended up contaminated by the very evil they'd worked so hard to destroyed. **Isn't that how it always works?** We become the evil we wanted to destroy.

It never works. The only way to get rid of evil isn't to isolate it, isn't to bind it up and chain it to a tree, isn't to destroy it, but to transform it to good.

The man sits at Jesus's feet, sound of mind and soul and spirit. Now let's not get hung up on the implausible elements of this story, whether there were demons or exorcisms or possessed pigs. **It is enough to know this man was broken and rejected, and after an encounter with Jesus was transformed.** But the townspeople, instead of being pleased at this man's change, grow afraid and ask Jesus to leave. **All those years this man had been the locus of evil, the standard against which others could justify themselves.** As long as they weren't like him, they'd be alright. But now he's well. Their scapegoat is healed. **They are keenly aware that if**

any evil happens in their town now, they can no longer blame it on him. Worse, what if Jesus sees something in them that needs healed? Jesus has caused them a real difficulty and the very people he'd come to help ask him to leave. **So Jesus leaves.** It wasn't his way to force himself on others.

The man who'd been healed said to Jesus, "Let me go with you."

Jesus said, "No, you stay here and tell others what God has done for you."

Jesus didn't stay, but he did leave behind a reminder of his visit—a changed man.

Now let's notice what Jesus asked this man to do. **A lot of us, when we have a transforming event in our lives, when we encounter God and are transformed or see life in a new way, or have what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called a "peak experience," we start to worrying God will expect something from us we're not able to give, perhaps make us do something we're not able to do.** But Jesus told this man to do the one thing for which he was qualified.¹ "Return to your home and tell others what God did for you."

Nothing big. Just tell others. Don't go back home and act like nothing happened. **That's always our tendency—our life was really bad and some wonderful blessing comes along and our lives just blossom.** But after awhile, we've grown so accustomed to this blessing we forget how wretched our lives had been. "Well, things weren't all that bad. That graveyard wasn't all that bad. I was making it. I wasn't drinking that much. My marriage wasn't that bad. I wasn't that sick. I wasn't that unhappy. I wasn't that broke. I wasn't that addicted. I wasn't that lonely. I wasn't that scared."

So Jesus tells the man to remember where he used to live—the graveyard, and where he lives now—in community, and to tell folks how he got from one place to the other—by the grace and goodness of God.

Where do you live?

How did you get there?

Is that where you want to stay?

¹ I am indebted to Fred Craddock for this thought, who voiced it in his wonderful Interpretations commentary on the Gospel of Luke.