

“Binding The Strong Man”

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1 Samuel 17:38-47
Mark 5:1-20

*David said to the Philistine,
“You come against me with sword and spear and javelin,
but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty,
the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.
This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands... 1 Samuel 17:45-46^a*

Let us pray... O God,
Help us avoid the temptation to label others as “bad guys” to blame,
but make us bold to fight the evil spirits of fear, deception, and hatred.
Help us to shoulder the responsibility to love those
we thought were our enemies, and to recognize our common kinship.
Help us to be genuine like Jesus and to live creatively.

Amen

When I was living in NJ in the early 1990s, I worked as a recreation therapist
at the Greystone Park State Psychiatric Hospital.

I was responsible for providing activities for
relatively high functioning adult residents
on the three locked wards of Building 50 Ellis.

So, I would take them out on leisure walks, or provide drawing materials for art,
or play chess with them, and even run Bingo games.

It was relatively easy work, yet it was also the most stressful job I ever had –
especially, when there was a call for “All Available Help”...

One time, there was such an alarm, and a man named Fred was shouting and
challenging everybody in the day room – and about thirty of us,
men and women, had responded to the call for “All Available Help”.
All of a sudden, one of the ward assistants, Mr. Grubbs, came up behind Fred –
and put his arms around him, loosely clasping his hands in front of the man.
Fred continued to shout, as Mr. Grubbs slowly backed him into the quiet room,
and the whole crowd of us advanced...

Mr. Grubbs had brought him partway into the doorway,
and I was directly across from them, about two rows back.
As I was bracing my foot against the wall, in case I had to push forward –
Fred shouted to me,
“And what are you going to do?!”
I said, “Fred, it’s Drew !”

It worked, because he didn’t say anything after that
and staff got him into the room and into restraints to sedate him.
I guess he knew I was a helper and not a threat –
or maybe he just didn’t know what I was talking about!

Willard, p.2

Mr. Grubbs showed us the best way to de-escalate a situation,
but there were other times when it was not so easy, but one thing was for sure:
It didn't matter how big somebody was, or how angry they were –
with enough people on hand, they were coming down.

During the time I was there at Greystone,
there were no incidents of any psychiatric patients
having such an episode – with access to a weapon.

So, there was never a time when staff would have had an excuse to hurt anyone –
not that there weren't instances of abuse by some staff.

However, any desperate person with a weapon would have been a different situation.
Even then, when such a person had been subdued and was on the ground,
from my experience, there could be no justification
for law enforcement of any type, to violently hit someone – let alone kill them.

People with mental illness for the most part, are presumed dangerous –
and that suspicion makes them a ready-made “boogeyman”.

That fear of someone who is challenged mentally – and therefore, unpredictable,
plays out in horror films.

But more often than not, I found the people at Greystone
were the ones who were really at risk of being preyed upon
when allowed to return to society.

Most mentally challenged people – as well as felons who have served their time,
have limited options for a healthy community or loyal friends, to return to.
So, there is a high risk for them of going back to the hospital, or prison.

American communities in general, have not accepted the responsibility
to make room for challenged people in any adequate or hospitable way –
apart from larger urban areas where they really can't ignore the problem.

Sometimes, I would see a patient return after only three months of being released,
and instead of feeling like we had failed this person again, I would say,
“Hey, how ya doing? Haven't seen you in a while!”

So, I made it my business to help provide moments of security and fun
for the patients I met each day, that hopefully would accumulate
for them to stabilize emotionally – and try again.

Our Gospel lesson today is a great example for how the mentally ill
can be treated unjustly, subdued and imprisoned.

There is a broader application for this story, too –
and how it can apply as a metaphor to some of the crises of our time.

The man who had been possessed by demons – also called a ‘demoniac’,
was a strong man who could not be restrained.

He was able to wrench the chains apart from his feet –
no matter how strong those bonds were,
or how often people tried to tie him down.

Willard, p.3

He lived in a graveyard – which suggests he had a morbid and confused mental state, alternately howling at the world and cringing in terror.
The name ‘Legion’ gives a clue that there is more to this story for what it may symbolize...

When Jesus heals this man, the demons escape to infest a herd of pigs which rush off in a suicidal stampede over a cliff and 2,000 of them are destroyed.

When the terrified swineherds run to tell everyone back in the town, the people all come out to see what happened.

But when they find the strong man restored to good health – rather than being satisfied with this, the townspeople ask Jesus to leave... but why ?

It is likely that this story was written so that the mentally ill man was perceived as both a scary boogeyman and a conveniently vulnerable scapegoat.

When Jesus heals this man, the town suddenly loses a lawbreaker to point to as a problem – and a decoy who draws attention away from something else...

Last year while on sabbatical, I had the privilege to hang out and have lunch with author and theologian, Dominic Crossan.

It was then that he told me about a theory he had, that begins with a question: “Why is it that the only demon-possessed people in the Bible are in the New Testament?”

He believes that this was a way for early Christians to talk about Roman oppression and the effect that this oppression had on the people of that occupied land.

When the Gospel of Mark was written, the Romans certainly were persecuting Christians, blaming them for a terrible fire that destroyed much of the city of Rome.

This was very likely a cover-up for arson perpetrated by Emperor Nero, to do building projects without the hassle of eminent domain.

So, Christians – being a small, vulnerable community, served as a good target.

Howard Thurman in his book Jesus & The Disinherited

said that ‘fear, deceit, and hatred’ work on both oppressor and the oppressed. That means criminals and rebels are examples of oppressed people who can’t take it anymore and act out by breaking the law – but it also means, those in authority are under pressure.

Willard, p.4

When law enforcers are obligated to maintain an unjust system,
some of them act out, too, by breaking the law and mistreating suspects.

When the relationship 'to protect and serve' the public is violated,
then this corresponds to what Dr. Crossan was saying,
about the coercive activity of "evil spirits".

I am convinced that this is at the heart of that crisis in our society
of unwarranted shootings by police,
as well as ambush-style shootings against police.

We want to think that the challenges we face in this world are really clear cut:
If there's a problem, there must be a solution.

If somebody breaks the law, they must be brought to justice.

If there's a will, there's a way and we all live happily ever after,
when the "bad guy" gets his due.

I believe all that is true, but we can be bamboozled –
about who the "bad guy" is and what the actual roots of a problem, are.

It was clear that the "bad guy" was Goliath in our lesson from 1 Samuel 17:38-47
as David challenged him *mano a mano* and prevailed in their combat.

This text follows that classic theme of the 'hero's journey' that we love so well
in stories from "Popeye" cartoons to "Star Wars" movies.

Unfortunately, it is a theme that can be misappropriated to blind us all
from root causes to real problems.

Jesus seems to endorse this approach
when he was taunted by scribes from Jerusalem,
as he talked about binding up a strong man to plunder his goods,
binding up the evildoer to rescue humankind.

However, when Jesus encounters the strong man with the Legion of demons,
he frees this man of the 'Legion' and liberates him from their possession.

So, it is not so clear who the "bad guy" is in this story.

At first, it would seem to be the scary demoniac.

But then Jesus draws out the 'Legion' of demons themselves,
binding them to their own words of deception,

They drive themselves off a cliff in a self-destructive frenzy.

However,

the townspeople share some blame... as their illicit pork industry was exposed.

For they were providing food to the occupying Roman army –
since neither Jews nor Arabs of the Middle East ate swineflesh.

Willard, p.5

Jesus confronted the evil spirits and drove them out nonviolently,
with the 'sword of his mouth' – his words.

He took away the town's scapegoat and decoy,
ruining their lucrative operation in the process – for which they stopped short
of blaming him, but instead asked him *politely* to leave their land...

Rejection was something Jesus would repeatedly face,
yet with vindication through the lives he touched to heal and help them –
like this person who was freed from domination by the 'Legion'.

Jesus' example of nonviolent confrontation through his words –
the 'sword of his mouth', shows us how to engage challenges in this life,
whether they are evil or just annoying.

Not only should we respond creatively like Jesus,
but we can and should simply be genuine like him.

By just being ourselves, being true to ourselves –
our higher selves that is, and not by acting out of self-interest alone
or acting out of the desperation of survival.

By being yourself, you imitate Christ.

Just as Jesus was the unique Son of God,
we are generic "children of God" and worthy of dignity.

As Jesus was the Son of Man – the model for being truly human,
we are human beings in all the creative and destructive possibilities
that being human means.

Yesterday, about 1,000 people came out to Lake Sumter Landing town square
and gathered to hear 10 of us speak about the plight of immigrant children.

The diversity of that multitude – and of the speakers,
bridged across political, religious, gender, and cultural divides.

That audience sat there patiently through the humidity of the morning
on rows and rows of seats graciously provided by The Villages
with the protective presence of our local police.

Everyone with their protest signs and "We Care" T-shirts,
listened intently – passed the piped-in radio station music,
as they strained to hear what was said over the PA system.

Everybody was there to affirm the need to figure out how we as a people
must undo injustice and work to do justice with integrity.

No more boogeymen, no more scapegoats, no more insanity,
no more decoys, no more "bad guys" to blame,
but a willingness to fight the evil spirits of fear, deception, and hatred.

We do this through love for those we thought were our enemies
and by recognizing our common kinship as members of the human family
and that we are all children of God, worthy of dignity and respect.

Amen

*Our lesson from 1 Samuel 17:38-47 comes from the New International Version
and tells a story that is familiar to many of us –
the little guy who stands up to a bully, David and Goliath...*

38 Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic.

He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head.

39 David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around,
because he was not used to them.

“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.”
So he took them off.

40 Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream,
put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand,
approached the Philistine.

41 Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him,
kept coming closer to David.

42 He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy,
glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him.

43 He said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?”
And the Philistine cursed David by his gods.

44 “Come here,” he said,
“and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!”

45 David said to the Philistine,
“You come against me with sword and spear and javelin,
but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty,
the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

46 This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands,
and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head.

This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army
to the birds and the wild animals,

and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.

47 All those gathered here will know

that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves;

for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Mark 5:1-20 [RSV]

- ¹ They came to the other side of the sea,
to the country of the Ger'asenes.
- ² And when he had come out of the boat,
there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit,
³ who lived among the tombs;
and no one could bind him any more, even with a chain;
- ⁴ for he had often been bound with fetters and chains,
but the chains he wrenched apart, and the fetters he broke in pieces;
and no one had the strength to subdue him.
- ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out,
and bruising himself with stones.
- ⁶ And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and worshiped him;
⁷ and crying out with a loud voice, he said,
"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?
I adjure you by God, do not torment me."
- ⁸ For he had said to him,
"Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"
- ⁹ And Jesus asked him,
"What is your name?"
He replied,
"My name is Legion; for we are many."
¹⁰ And he begged him eagerly not to send them out of the country.
- ¹¹ Now a great herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside;
¹² and they begged him, "Send us to the swine, let us enter them."
- ¹³ So he gave them leave.
And the unclean spirits came out, and entered the swine;
and the herd, numbering about two thousand,
rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.
- ¹⁴ The herdsmen fled, and told it in the city and in the country.
And people came to see what it was that had happened.
- ¹⁵ And they came to Jesus, and saw the demoniac sitting there,
clothed and in his right mind, the man who had had the legion;
and they were afraid.
- ¹⁶ And those who had seen it told what had happened
to the demoniac and to the swine.
¹⁷ And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their neighborhood.
- ¹⁸ And as he was getting into the boat,
the man who had been possessed with demons begged him
that he might be with him.
- ¹⁹ But he refused, and said to him,
"Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you,
and how he has had mercy on you."
- ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decap'olis
how much Jesus had done for him; and all men marveled.