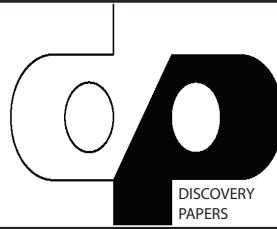


HOME FROM THE TOMBS

SERIES: INVITED: STORIES OF
WELCOME IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE.



Catalog No. 20160719
Luke 8:26-39
2nd Message
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July 17, 2016

Luke 8:26-39

Shunned

Philip Zimbardo grew up in the Bronx. He was smart, a good leader, and a skilled athlete. As a result, he was a pretty popular kid. During high school, Phil's family moved to North Hollywood, California. From the very first day at his new school, Phil was completely shunned by the other kids. No one greeted him. No one talked to him. No one would sit with him. In fact when he sat down in the cafeteria, kids got up and moved far away from him.

This went on for months. Phil was so wounded emotionally from this shunning that he developed severe asthma. He was unable to sleep and often missed school.

Phil made the baseball team that spring, and he got the courage to ask one of his teammates why everyone avoided him. The boy said this, "A lot of kids are afraid of you because they think your family must be from the East Coast Mafia, since you are Italian—the only one in our school—so it's better to avoid you than take any chances angering you."

Unfortunately, the students kept shunning Phil. His struggles with asthma continued, and the family decided to move back to New York for Phil's health. Back home in the Bronx, Phil's asthma disappeared. He thrived in school, in sports, and socially. The year he graduated, Phil was voted most popular boy in his class.¹

It's amazing how much being welcomed or being shunned can influence our emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being!

The Good News Message

Last week Steve Zeisler introduced our summer series called *Invited: Stories of Welcome in the Gospel of Luke*. He pointed us to Jesus' mission in Luke 4 where Jesus said he came to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind,

and to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18). This message would certainly have been good news to Phil Zimbardo in high school!

Over and over, Luke writes of Jesus teaching, preaching, and telling stories about the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus spoke more about this kingdom than any other topic across his three years of public ministry. And then Luke reports how Jesus associated with *all kinds* of people. He healed every sickness and forgave people's sins. By word and action, Jesus was issuing hundreds of invitations to join God's kingdom.

Today, we'll see that Jesus wasn't exaggerating about the good news that he had to offer. We'll see him take his mission to an extreme and bring good news to a man on the very fringe of society. Jesus will literally release a captive—a man so oppressed that his identity was stripped from him. Only the power of Jesus could set this man free. And it was Jesus' welcome that healed his shattered life and transformed his suffering into good news. Let's read the story together.

Luke 8:26-39:

Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27 When Jesus had stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." 29 For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time it had seized him. He was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert.) 30 Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion," for many demons had entered him. 31 And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. 32 Now a large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him to let

them enter these. So he gave them permission. 33 Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned.

34 When the herdsmen saw what had happened, they fled and told it in the city and in the country. 35 Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. 36 And those who had seen it told them how the demon-possessed man had been healed. 37 Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. 38 The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him.

The Other Side of the Lake

That is a good news story! There are so many trails we could follow in this story—like that odd bit about the demons going into the pigs and then the pigs drowning in the lake—but I want us to focus on the effect Jesus has on the demoniac. To fully understand the significance of what Jesus does, we need a little background.

When Jesus started his public ministry, he did so among his own people, the Jews, in his home region of Galilee. But soon enough he decides to “preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns” (Luke 4:43). So he and his disciples travel south to Judea and to Jerusalem. Along the way Jesus teaches, and heals, and shares meals with strangers and friends alike. Eventually he returns to minister in Galilee. One day, without preamble or explanation, he says to his disciples in Luke 8:22, “Let us go across to the other side of the lake.”

That’s a curious destination for Jesus to choose. The eastern shore of the sea of Galilee was a predominantly Gentile region. A good Jew concerned with his holiness wouldn’t go there. To make matters worse, the area where Jesus landed boasted both tombs and a large herd of pigs. Both made Jews ritually unclean before God. Jesus should have avoided this area, but his mission to spread the good news of the kingdom of God wins out, and he disregards conventional boundaries.

Jesus jumps ashore and immediately encounters the possessed man. Here is a tormented figure! Let’s sum up what we know about him so we can truly understand his plight.

The Captive

Luke tells us that the man is from the nearby city, and he “had” demons, plural. When the man calls himself *Legion*, he paints a bleak picture of his life. Legion is a military term. In the first century, a legion referred to a grouping of soldiers between 5,000 and 7,000 strong. How could one man withstand such a force?

While the Old Testament scarcely mentions demons, by Jesus’ day demon possession seems to be a common affliction. Both Jews and Gentiles then believed in and feared demons. Jews believed that demons belonged to Satan and that their goal was to lead people to sin. They thought demons caused some, but not all, diseases. Gentiles believed demons were intermediaries between the gods and humans and that their work was to cause disasters and misery.

So, it’s no wonder that this man’s neighbors kicked him out of the city and bound his hands in chains and his feet in shackles. That’s a reasonable choice if you’re considering public safety. But imagine—the demons were so strong that the man broke every binding they put on him. Eventually he lived naked and alone among the tombs. Sometimes the demons would drive him into the desert. His neighbors feared this wild and unpredictable behavior, so they posted guards to keep watch.

It’s as if this man has no identity. Because of the demons he’s lost his home. He has no occupation, no friends, no clothes, little sanity, and no name. Sure, he’s well known throughout the countryside, but he’s known only as “the demoniac”[a] (Luke 8:36). The demons inflicted terrible physical and emotional oppression that led to a horrible kind of captivity—being an outcast. When Jesus meets him, he’s more animal than man—a rabid animal even.

This is the man, or *thing*, that Jesus meets on the Gentile shores of the sea. From any perspective—Jewish, Gentile, or just common sense—Jesus should hop back in his boat and sail away. But Jesus isn’t out for a pleasure cruise or a tour of the eastern shores. Jesus is on a mission and he has good news for this slave.

A Transforming Encounter

Jesus looks at this social pariah and sees past the spectacle on the surface. Jesus sees the suffering soul. A man undone by demons. A man so socially and spiritually dead that he is at home among the tombs. The good news is that Jesus has the power to set him free from these invisible chains.

Though it's not reported chronologically, the first thing Jesus does is command the unclean spirit to come out of the man. The man falls down and begs Jesus to not torment him (Luke 8:28). The word "torment" implies a harsh type of questioning, even to the extreme of using torture to get the answers sought. The man expects Jesus to inflict more pain and suffering upon him, which isn't surprising after what he's endured at the hands of his neighbors. After a brief conversation with one of the demons, Jesus casts them into the herd of pigs that subsequently run into the sea and drown.

And the demoniac? He is well again. As it says in verse 36, he is healed. Luke literally wrote that he is "saved." He is "clothed and in his right mind" sitting at the feet of Jesus (Luke 8:35). This is such a reversal from what we saw before, that we should call it a resurrection.

To be clothed is to be human again. Where did he get these clothes? Luke doesn't say, but unless you think Jesus conjured clothes out of thin air, then it's safe to imagine Jesus taking off his own outer garment and giving it to the man. Or maybe Jesus grabbed a spare set of Peter's clothes from the boat.

As a hospital chaplain I spent a lot of time in the Emergency Department. Trauma rooms are places of high drama and intense action. With minutes to save lives, there's no time for modesty. The staff cuts off the patient's clothes so they can draw blood, assess injuries, and hook up monitors and IVs. There are few moments in life as intensely vulnerable as being naked and helpless in front of strangers.

When the demoniac was naked, he was more animal than man. He was not fit to live among other humans. Jesus clothes him and gives him dignity. The notorious demoniac is a person again. He is well. He can return to society. Clothes are a symbol of his restored humanity.

But there's more for this restored man. He sits at Jesus' feet, and that's significant. This is the posture students took to hear their rabbi's teaching. Jesus didn't just save the man from demons and restore his humanity,

he also gave the man a new and greater identity—that of disciple! From demoniac to disciple—that's quite a transformation!

The Deliberate, Wide Welcome of Jesus

This story presents a striking picture of the kingdom of God, a kingdom which totally reconfigures Jewish ideas of who's "in". It shows the radical welcome of Jesus. We have a lot to learn about Jesus' hospitality this summer, so let's start with just two observations today.

First, notice that Jesus' welcome is deliberate. He chose to sail to the other side of the lake. He didn't avoid the tombs. He didn't hop back in his boat and flee. He didn't offer a polite hello and avoid eye contact like I would have, and then quickly leave to search for a more palatable disciple.

I believe Jesus chose to sail to Gerasa because he heard about this untamable demoniac. He didn't go just to demonstrate his miraculous powers to witnesses. I believe he chose to engage the demoniac because he cared about the man. Jesus wanted to set him free from this terrible oppression. Notice that once the man was healed, Jesus didn't seem to have another destination in mind on the eastern shores. He sailed back west. Setting the demoniac free was his mission.

In this story, Jesus' welcome isn't the result of coincidence. There's no reluctant obligation to heal. There's no fear motivating him. Jesus' welcome is deliberate. It pursues. It goes out of its way to find the lost and hurting, and it doesn't back down when it faces wild things.

Jesus' welcome is also wide—far wider than his disciples are probably comfortable with! In Jesus day, there was a pretty clear social order. For Jews, both the law and rabbinic tradition shaped boundaries of who was an insider and who was an outsider—who was righteous or a sinner—who was clean or unclean. Everything revolved around being close to their holy God.

Here are some basic pictures of the social strata from a Jewish perspective. Jewish pride centered on Jerusalem because it was the location of God's temple. Those from the southern region of Judea were privileged to live closer to the center of religious life. Galilee was far to the north. As a region, it had many more of the unclean and despised Roman and Greek settlers.



At this point in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has had very little interaction with Gentiles. He healed a Roman centurion’s servant, but they never met in person. Now, Jesus is face-to-face with an unclean, demon possessed, Galilean, Gentile. He’s certainly traveled to the outer ring of society. But instead of shunning the demoniac, Jesus engages him, heals him, and makes him a disciple. By doing this, Jesus signals that the Kingdom of God is open to those on the very fringe of society. His encounter with the demoniac overturns the tables of Jewish—and Gentile—and maybe even *our*—expectations. Those whom the Jews thought were fixed outsiders are now certainly invited in. This is the widest welcome possible.

Responding to Jesus’ Welcome

Some of us say “Amen!” to this welcome because we recognize parts of ourselves in the demoniac’s oppression. Some of us know what it’s like to be shunned like Phil Zimbardo or the demoniac. To know the deep loneliness that comes with being an outsider. And some

of us know what it feels like to be more dead than alive. And we are so glad that Jesus came to seek and save lost ones like us!

But others of us see the deliberate, wide welcome of Jesus and think, “Yikes!” As followers of Jesus we’re the insiders now. *We* are supposed to be ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. Our welcome should mimic our master’s welcome to the outcasts and oppressed. Internally, many of us may wonder if we have the guts and confidence to welcome like Jesus did.

There’s a big difference between the culture of first century Palestine and 21st century America. We no longer think in communitarian terms like the Jews did. Americans are more individualistic. “I” seems to be the center of our social strata. “I think” is a common phrase around here. How often becomes a weapon against those who hold a different opinion! Sometimes, American culture fights our Christian calling.

We Christians have a more important identity than the individual “I”. We are *the people* of God. We are part of God’s church, a body of interdependent parts meant to light up this very dark world. If we are the hands and feet of Jesus, as we like to say, then we should be looking out for the outcasts, the oppressed, and the enslaved in our society.

Well first, who are they in our context? Addicts? The mentally ill? The homeless? Prostitutes? The disabled? The unemployed? The illiterate? The socially awkward? African-Americans? “Illegal” immigrants? It’s an important and profound thing as the people of God, to stop and ask ourselves—who have we outcasted? Who have I outcasted? There’s probably a very wide crowd of people *we know*, who need the wide welcome of Jesus.

I worry that many of us are like the witnesses in the story of the demoniac. They traded fear for fear. First they feared the demoniac and pushed him outside their community. Later they feared Jesus and begged him to leave their city (Luke 8:37). The wildness of the demoniac was too much for them and the power of the kingdom of God was too much for them.

Many of us, myself included, fear people who don’t fit into our categories of social acceptability. We don’t like to be uncomfortable, so we avoid people who make us so. We don’t want too many of our relationships to require work, so we draw close to people who are tame, and clean, and like us. But I wonder, is fear keeping us from loving generously?

Not long before he sailed to Gerasa and met the demoniac, Jesus said this to a large crowd of disciples:

Luke 6:32-36:

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. 35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. 36 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Friends, Jesus is calling us to the fringes of our society, to the dirty, smelly, and wild places and people. He’s calling us to have the eyes to see the captives and oppressed and outcasts among us. We are a legion of soldiers called to take the full force of God’s love to the forgotten among us. Can you follow this call? Can I? By God’s grace, yes!

Welcoming Ross

When I was 22 years old I moved to Vancouver, British Columbia to begin graduate school at Regent College. Vancouver is a huge city. At the time it contained the poorest postal code in North America. At 22, I hadn’t encountered much poverty. I hadn’t interacted with many homeless on the streets of Columbus, Ohio where I grew up, or in Santa Barbara, California where I went to college. Suddenly I lived in a city that seemed haunted by homeless, beggars, prostitutes, drug addicts, and the mentally ill.

There was a homeless man named Ross who I saw all over the city. He was very tall and thin, with straggly hair curling around his shoulders. He had threadbare clothes and shoes that were falling apart. Ross suffered some kind of mental illness. Sometimes he was happy and friendly and other times he had a wild look in his eyes and would rant on the street corner. His behavior made me feel wary, uncomfortable, and sometimes scared. I usually made wide circles around him so I didn’t have to interact with him.

Except, I couldn’t avoid Ross completely. He often hung out on the corner by Regent, probably because it was one of the few places where he was shown kindness. Over the years I saw many of my fellow students invite Ross inside for coffee, or sit down with him in the courtyard just to talk. These students treated Ross like a human being. They listened to him. They got to know who he was underneath the mental illness. They saw the man, not the shabby clothes. And when Ross was struck and killed by a car, Regent students held a memorial service for him in our chapel. One of the students drew a beautiful portrait of Ross and placed it by the door. They knew and honored Ross the man.

Friends, that is one way to show the deliberate, wide welcome of Jesus. I learned so much by watching my fellow students love Ross. Years later I became a hospital chaplain, a job which gave me the opportunity to interact daily with the oppressed and all kinds of outcasts. Inspired by the examples of Jesus and those Regent students, I eventually learned to relax, engage, and love people who made me uncomfortable.

If you notice someone on fringes—whether it’s here at church, or at school, or at work, or in your neighborhood—could you go to them, engage with them, and get to know them? Certainly be mindful of your safety and know your limits, but don’t let fear alone hold you back. Showing respect and kindness to people who are suffering can be profoundly healing. Who needs your welcome?

Your Beachhead of Hospitality

Sometimes we Christians get tangled up in having the right or best evangelism strategy. And I know Christians who feel inadequate because they are not called to foreign missions or full-time ministry, or because they don’t have a seminary education. Jesus gives us a very simple evangelism strategy in Luke 8 and it doesn’t require foreign travel or higher education.

The demoniac-turned-disciple begged to follow Jesus. In Luke 8:39 Jesus gave these instructions, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” And that’s exactly what the disciple did. He went back to his city and told his redemption story.

One scholar summarizes the demoniac's story this way:

*"The one who before had no home save the abode of the dead is sent back to his home and told to make it a little beachhead of the hospitality of God. Through his living witness, the people of the city will have a second chance to access God's grace."*²

Everyday we interact with people who need to hear the Gospel. It's the people we know and have relationships with who will be more likely receive our good news stories, because they know where we've been.

Last week I vacationed with my family in a small lake town in North Carolina. I went to the store with my sister-in-law, and as I was putting groceries on the check-out belt, I noticed a shiny piece of paper propped up on the ledge by the gum. The paper told me in bold print that I was a sinner. That I was going to burn in hell if I didn't repent. That Jesus died for my sins and that I need to pray to ask him into my heart or I would perish.

It's been a long time since I've seen an evangelistic tract; apparently they haven't changed much. It was a cold piece of paper expounding my sinfulness. There was no warmth, no dignity, no invitation to a life set free. It was just lots of bad news with two sterile lines about Jesus' forgiveness. It will be a miracle if that piece of paper leads a single person to follow Jesus.

Jesus gives us a better way than fear-based evangelism. He shows us how to welcome others, and then he says go home and tell your story. Instead of arming ourselves with the four spiritual laws, or the Roman Road to salvation, or a complex evangelism strategy that we read about in the latest trending book, he wants us to simply tell our people the awesome story of what God has done for us.

I guarantee that your story is powerful. Surely God has done something for you—he's set you free from some kind of oppression or captivity—and your story may be exactly what your coworker or your neighbor needs to hear.

Where is your beachhead of hospitality? Who needs your wide, deliberate welcome? People of God, don't be afraid. Go and share what God has done for you.

Footnotes

[a] Luke 8:36 ESV "demon-possessed," In Greek, a unique term, *demoniac*

Endnotes

¹ Sword, Rosemary K.M. and Zimbardo, Philip. "Shunning—The Ultimate Rejection." *Psychology Today* 1 Feb 2013. Web. < <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-time-cure/201302/shunning-the-ultimate-rejection> >

² Byrne, Brendan. *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel*. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015. Pg 95. Print.