

Cross the Way
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OK, hands up if you have heard of Mel Brooks! For those who don't know, Mel is a comedian who has done everything from sketch comedy to records to movies. Some of which I really like, some which I don't like so much. But Mel has one of my all time favorite quotes. It goes like this: "Comedy is when *you* fall down an open manhole and die. Tragedy is when *I* cut my little finger." Pretty grim, right? Definitely gallows humor.

But I think it also shows something which is often true about human beings. Sometimes we are simply not compassionate. We can tend to care more about ourselves than other people. Often, we draw lines between ourselves or our group and other people or groups.

Somewhere in my seminary education I remember hearing that there are an estimated 10,000 protestant denominations in the United States alone. That's a lot of lines between members of *one* faith. Plus there are all those lines between Protestants and Catholics and Orthodox Christians. Or all of those between us Christians and Jews, Buddhists, Unitarian Universalists, Muslims, practitioners of Shinto, Wicca or native traditions. We also draw lines between ourselves based on our skin hue; our genders; our favorite sports teams; the products and foods we favor; the kind of cars or trucks we drive. We draw so many lines!

Some of the lines that seem to really divide Americans these days are political lines. There is a lot of heat between the two major parties in American politics. And each group seems to spend most of their time seeking out ways to run down and demonize the other side, don't they? Someone is always yelling at someone for not doing something soon enough, or taking action too soon, or taking the wrong action... Governance seems to be increasingly about showing how unlike your opponents you are rather than really *doing* anything. And no seems to be willing to cross the aisle to reconcile *anything*.

In Jesus' day, there were divides between cultures that were even worse. Some of which endure today. And all those very different cultures were right next to each other. They were sort of piled up on each other. A few miles of Gentile land here, a few miles of Jewish land there, with mountains and rivers and big lakes—called "seas"—serving as borders.

This morning's reading opens with Jesus crossing one sea—the Sea of Galilee—to arrive in the Gerasenes. No sooner does he step on dry land than he meets up with a demon possessed man—raving and drooling and being generally terrifying. Now, at the risk of sounding obvious, I want

you to note that there are a lot of differences between Jesus and the demoniac. You could even say they were opposites.

To begin with, the possessed man was naked, and Jesus was clothed. Now, this was way before HBO or Showtime—or even National Geographic—so nude people were a pretty rare sight. So, there was some heavy shock value there. Plus, nudity outside the home was unheard in ancient Jewish culture, and heavily discouraged. Now admittedly, Jesus was not in *his* culture any more—after all, the people of the Gerasenes were *gentile*. But many things about the demoniac were clearly out of whack. Not only was he nude, he also made his home among tombs, where *dead bodies* were laid. Being in contact with a man who hung out in Gentile cemeteries would have posed a serious purity concern for any Jewish person, and all the more for a Rabbi. Christ's holiness was in stark contrast to the demoniacs sullied and degraded living circumstances.

Another point of contrast—Jesus arrives on gentile shores as a center of a religious community. The demoniac has been *cast out* of his community. In fact, we learn that he is regularly chained up among the tombs, and kept distant from the living community...at least until he escapes again. Whereas, Jesus moves freely—even crossing into Gentile territory as he wishes, the demoniac can only move about by breaking out of literal chains and shackles.

I will lift up one more contrast, one more point of opposition between Jesus and the demoniac, although we could probably brainstorm many, many more. When Jesus asks the name of the demon possessing the man in order to exercise power over it, the text says: “‘Legion’; for many demons had entered him.”¹ This poor man—this poor raving Gentile—doesn't have just *one* demon: he is full to bursting with them. You may have already heard of some legion in another setting. The legion behind this story refers to a Roman military unit composed of thousands of troops—anywhere from one thousand to over six thousand. This poor man is full of *thousands* of demons. This stands in contrast to Jesus who is—as the author of Luke reminds us many times—full of the Holy Spirit of the One God.²

So, here is Jesus, stepping out into strange land, immediately meeting up with someone who could easily be called his opposite: Christ meets anti-Christ. In today's world many people confronting their opposite would feel at least a little challenged. The fight-or-flight response would likely kick in. We might feel compelled to react strongly. At the very least we might try to avoid or ignore our opposite. But what does Jesus do? Does he quip “wouldn't it be funny if you fell down a manhole just now?” No. Does he command the raving drooler to back away so he doesn't make Jesus unclean? No. Does Jesus enumerate the ways in which the demoniac had failed to act that may have led him to becoming possessed? No.

¹ Luke 8:30d.

² Luke 1:15, 1:35, 1:80, 4:1, 4:14,4:21.

Faced with his opposite—faced by a man possessed by demons, Jesus does not add to his burden or demonize him further. Instead, Jesus crosses the distance between them as surely as he had just crossed the Sea of Galilee. Instead of pushing the possessed man away, he offers him healing and hope, shalom and true wellness. Instead of fleeing from the man, or trying to chain him up like the townspeople had been doing, Jesus brings him into a new and better place. He offers him another chance to be a member of the community instead of an outcast. Jesus crosses the gulf between them and reconciles the man to himself, which Luke calls being in his “right mind.” This is another demonstration of God’s work through Jesus, not just with Jews, but with all people. One definition of reconciliation is “harmonizing.” Jesus brings this man to a state of harmony, and out of a state of chaos and frenzy. He even rustles up some clothes to complete the transformation from outcast to *citizen*.

So, how do the people from the surrounding town greet the news of this amazing transformation? There is no parade. There is no party. Not even a passing “Wow, cool!” No—they ask him to leave! “Yeah, Jesus, it’s great that you healed this guy we had all given up on, but we are a little freaked out about everything, so could you just go home now, please?” Their first reaction to the miracle is *fear*. Not joy, or wonder, or even curiosity, but *fear*.

I think there might have been a little anger in the mix, too. You remember *where* Jesus sent the demons, right?} {Directly into the pigs! And then—bam!—they took off running down a steep hill into the lake and *drown*. Now, the people of the Gerasenes *raised* pigs for a living. This Jesus shows up and in one quick moment—bye, bye profits! That had to be frustrating.

At first glance it even seems a little mean for Jesus to have done that. So, here’s a little back story that helped me understand it better. It was believed that demons usually existed either in nether regions like the “abyss” that they ask *not* to be returned to in the reading, or in host bodies.³ The trouble is if they were in host bodies demons could cause all sorts of problems, as they did with the man in the story. And if they were hanging out in the abyss, they could plot their next possession. Now, Jesus is one step ahead of the game like always. So, he agrees to send them into the pigs *as they have asked*, fully aware that they will stampede down the cliff and into the water. You see, water was believed to be deadly to demons. That’s the reason it is used in our baptisms. It has been thought to extinguish demons for millennia. So, Jesus isn’t just picking on the pigs or the swineherds here. Nor do I believe that this is a veiled message about the Jewish prohibition on pork. Rather, Jesus is saving the community from any possible return of this swarm of demons. Not just the one man who was their host, but everyone. There were enough demons to possess the whole town and then some. But Jesus extinguishes them instead.

³ Luke 8:31.

Now we can't blame the townspeople for not understanding Christ's motives. It is easy to sympathize with their desire to have him go. So, Jesus leaves, but not without first doing something *subversive*. Throughout the gospels, when Jesus meets people he invites them to join him on his way. Sometimes he extends the invitation and people refuse. The way of discipleship *is* challenging and confounding to many. But today he has an eager volunteer:

The man from whom the demons had gone *begged* that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, *and declare how much God has done for you.*"⁴

Jesus crosses back on his usual way and asks the man to stay rather than to follow him. Why do you suppose that is? {I think he is planting a church.} {This demon possessed man has been healed and made able to witness to the awesome saving power of Jesus Christ. If he had joined Jesus on his way, memories and stories about that demoniac on the edge of town would have changed. Perhaps faded with time, or become part of local tall tales. Instead, the saved man was restored to being part of a community which had shunned and shackled him. The formerly raving man became a mouthpiece of the truth of God's healing, shalom and reconciliation. The one time agent of chaos became the means to bring harmony to a formerly broken community.

There were many lines between Jesus and that man, many seemingly unbridgeable gulfs. And Jesus crossed the way between them, extended healing and wholeness, and bringing harmony into chaos. That's our model from the Gospel today; that is our work, too, as Christians—when we find ourselves opposed to someone; when we are sure we are standing toe to toe with our opposite—religious, political or what-have-you—we are called to cross the way between us and to bring reconciliation. To exorcize, not to demonize. To heal, not to hurt. To welcome, not to cast out. To cross the way, no matter how far a journey it seems. May God equip us all to cross the way, and to build community in place of isolation.

Amen.

⁴ Luke 8:38-39

Luke 8:26-39

26Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. 28When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— 29for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times 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 wilds.) 30Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. 31They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. 32Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. 33Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. 34When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they 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. 36Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 37Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. 38The 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.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.