

I

This winter and spring, we've been making our way through the gospel according to Mark. And thus far in the story, word has continued to spread through the villages along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee about this one who teaches with authority, this one who casts out demons and heals the sick, and, who it's said even has the power to forgive sins. In our story last week, the crowd had grown so large that Jesus found it necessary to get into a boat and row out onto the lake a bit, while the crowds gathered on the shore, and he taught them about the kingdom of God using short stories called parables.

Last week, we listened as Jesus told a story about a sower, in which a sower went out to sow, and some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up, and some seed fell on the rocky ground, and it sprang up quickly, but when the sun rose, it scorched and died, because it had no depth of root, and some seed fell among the brambles and thorns, and the thorns choked the seed and it bore no fruit, and some seed fell among the good soil, and it bore a yield of 30, 60, even 100 fold.

When the disciples later asked Jesus to explain this parable to them, he said, rather cryptically, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God." And we said last week that the secret is that in the kingdom of God, there is no limit to the number of seeds available to the sower, so the sower has the freedom

to scatter the seeds of God's kingdom hither and yon, and need not worry about some falling on the path or the rocks or in the thornbushes, because the seed that falls on the good soil will bear 300, 600, or even 1000 percent returns.

II

In 1899, a Congressman from Missouri, while attending a banquet in Philadelphia, said this: "I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs [and Democrats], and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me." And henceforth, Missouri became known as the Show-Me State. In our story this morning, Jesus is about to *show* the disciples what the parable of the sower looks like in action.

In between where we left off last week and where we'll pick up our story this week, the disciples joined Jesus in the boat, and they set out across the lake in the gathering darkness, when a tremendous storm broke upon the sea, and the boat was tossed on the crashing waves, and the disciples fought to keep the boat from sinking while Jesus was sound asleep on a cushion in the stern. The disciples woke Jesus up and said, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" And, Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And there was a dead calm. And then Jesus said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And the disciples were filled with great awe

and said to one another, “Who is this, that even the wind and the waves obey?”

And so when our story opens this morning, Jesus and the disciples have made landfall on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. They’re bone tired. They’re soaking wet. They’re hungry and a seasick all at the same time.

And so while they are overjoyed that they survived the terrible storm and they are now on dry land, I imagine they’re also apprehensive, because the dry land they’ve landed on belongs to a people called the Gerasenes.

III

If you’ve ever seen the movie *The Lion King*, you’ll recall there’s a scene when the father takes his young son up to a high rock to show him the kingdom, and advises him that someday, all that he sees will be his – everything the light touches. And the son looks out at that grand vista, and he says, “What about that shadowy place over there?” And the father warns him sternly, “You must never go there, son, for that is beyond our borders.”

Jesus and the disciples had been raised as first-century Jews, mostly in villages along the northern and western shores of the Sea of Gailee. They had grown up learning the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures and learning to observe all of the laws regarding what was clean and unclean. And so they had learned from an early age that the land on the southeastern shore of the lake was unclean territory – a place not filled

with pious, righteous, God-fearing Jews, but filled with unclean, pagan Gentiles. In the minds of first-century Jews, the land of the Gerasenes was the shadowy place beyond the borders.

And so here are Jesus and the disciples, having just crossed the lake, having just survived a terrible storm, making landfall in the very place their mothers had warned them about.

And so with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Mark 5:1-20.

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” He begged him earnestly not to send them out of

the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. 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.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Jesus crossed the sea to the land of the Gerasenes to *show his disciples* that there is no limit to the number of seeds of grace and mercy and healing and redemption that can be sown. Jesus crossed the sea to the land of the Gerasenes to *show his disciples* that there *are no boundaries* to where seeds

of grace and mercy and justice seeds may be scattered.

And some seed fell on the path, and the rocks, and in the thorns. The Gerasenes came out and saw the pigs dead in the lake and the man restored to his right mind, and they did not rejoice. They did not celebrate the arrival of the kingdom of God in their very midst. In fact, they invited Jesus to leave their neighborhood right that very minute.

But some seed fell on the good soil. And the man who had been released from the grip of a legion demons went not just to his home, but throughout the entire Decapolis – ten villages and towns – not just telling what had happened to him, but *proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God*. He himself was a beneficiary of the sowing of seeds, and the seeds planted in him bore a yield of 30, 60, even 100-fold.

IV

I wonder, my friend, where the land of the Gerasenes is for you. Where is the place that you were taught from a young age to avoid at all costs? Where is the place that you were taught was filled with the "wrong kinds of people?"

Maybe for you it wasn't so much a physical place that you were taught was "unclean," but maybe a type of person. These days, even something so trivial as wearing a red hat with the letters MAGA can identify you with a particular tribe, a particular group of people, and depending on your perspective, that hat

either signifies that the person wearing it is a “true believer” and “one of us,” or is unclean and maybe even filled with demons.

For you, my friend, who are the Gerasenes, the people that you’ve been taught are unclean and to be avoided?

Here’s the thing that strikes me about what happened right before this text. That boat didn’t end up on the shore of the land of the Gerasenes by accident. It wasn’t blown there by the wind and the waves. No, Jesus calmed the storm and then brought that little boat and full of disciples into the shore *on purpose*.

Jesus brought his Galileans through the storm and across the sea to *show them* that there is *no limit* to the seeds of mercy and grace and healing and forgiveness and new life that can be sown. There are *no boundaries* to the kingdom of God, including even the boundaries set by the very demons of hell itself.

For a very long time, the church has used a statement of faith called the Apostles’ Creed. And you may have noticed that there is this odd little line that says, “He was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell.”

And you may know that some of our brothers and sisters in other Christian traditions have chosen to omit that phrase – he descended into hell. And they have their reasons for doing so.

But here’s why I’m glad that we have held onto it. Because it reminds me that because of the life, death, and resurrection of this strange rabbi from Nazareth whom we call Jesus the Christ, there is nowhere on the earth or above the earth or even beneath the earth that the grace and mercy and healing and justice of God cannot go.

Before Jesus and the disciples landed on the shore, the demon-possessed man was living his own kind of hell among the tombs. In my own practice of ministry, I have come across a few souls over the years who have been living through events so severe, so traumatic, so painful in their lives, that the popular conception of hell as a hot place at the center of the earth seems like a paradise by comparison.

And so the truth that the gospel proclaims, and the truth that this text affirms, is that there is nowhere that the love and mercy and justice of Jesus Christ cannot go.

There is no sin of yours that is beyond the reach of Christ’s forgiving.

There is no hurt of yours that is beyond the boundaries of Christ’s healing.

There is no legion of demons that has hold of you from which the power of Christ cannot release you.

There is nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nothing in all creation that can

separate you from the love of God
poured out for you in Jesus the Christ.

V

Jesus calmed the storm. Jesus
crossed the sea. Jesus descended into
hell. To show his disciples, to show *us*,
that he is the one who even the wind and
the waves and the demons must obey.

And so we can go from this place,
this sanctuary, this place that for so
many of us feels safe and familiar, this
place where we feel connected to our
past and our people, and we can follow
Jesus as he leads us through the storms,
as he leads us far beyond these borders.

So let us not be afraid to seek out
and engage diversity – even if that
diversity is found in something both so
simple and so divisive as the color of a
hat. As we seek out and engage that
diversity, as we scatter seeds of God’s
reconciliation and justice and healing,
let us do so fully aware that we might
encounter hostility, even outright
rejection. Let us not be afraid that some
of the seeds we sow might fall on rocky
ground. And let us never forget that
Jesus himself has demonstrated for us
the secret of the kingdom of God – there
is no place to where the seeds of love,
joy, peace, patience, kindness,
generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and
self-control may not be sown, and in the
kingdom of God, our bag of seeds has no
bottom.

Thanks be to God. Amen.