

1 I find myself more and more curious about the man in our Gospel reading today. Who is he? Where did he come from? What happened that led him to this point? There's a lot we don't know about the man in our reading today. And yet, it's easy to jump to some conclusions based on what we do know. He was possessed by demons and he enters into the synagogue – a place where he is not supposed to be, on account of the whole being possessed by demons thing. That was the rule. Being possessed by demons made you unclean and so you couldn't worship or offer sacrifices until you went through the cleansing ritual, which you couldn't do until you were no longer possessed by demons and therefore, it was best if you just stayed away from everyone else. Kind of like quarantine, except much more long term, bordering on permanent. Two weeks look pretty tame in comparison. 2 It is, in the literal sense, a Catch-22, where the thing he needs for healing is the thing he can't have because he's sick.

Now, admittedly, there's a lot about this story that feels far outside my experience and I would venture a guess that it's not an everyday occurrence for you to come across individuals possessed by demonic forces. I don't know what demonic possession looks like or feels like, but I also don't think we should discount it so quickly just because it doesn't fit the narrative of our 21st century Western world. I think the story and, in particular, the man himself deserve to be heard on their own terms. So the man is possessed by an unclean spirit. And I think our initial tendency, like many in his own time, is to wonder how this happened. 3 Is it because of something he did? Did he dabble in demonic worship? Did he sell his soul in exchange for something else? Did he do evil, wrong, bad things? Or was he the victim of some great systemic issues? And all of these things fuel our desire to know whether he was a good person caught up in an evil greater than himself or a bad person who made poor choices and decisions that led him to this point.

Because we like things nice and neat, you see. Good and bad. Right and wrong. Black and white. And if we had our say in the matter, we'd easily be able to determine who is good and who is bad and thus who is deserving of the love and mercy and compassion and grace of God and who is not. This is largely how our society operates. In fact, a majority of people believe that the main purpose of life is to be a good person, never mind that it's not always clear what that looks like. What's more, roughly 83% rate themselves as "good" and "above average". Take a moment to just think about how the math on that works. 4 But as Martin Luther, in all of his brilliance taught us, we are always simultaneously sinners and saints. In other words, life is rarely so easily divided into right and wrong, good and bad, black and white. Instead, it's much more gray. And we hate that it is this way, but if we're honest with ourselves, we know it to be true. Our lives are not nearly as clean and neat as we might pretend.

5 Because here's the thing about this demon-possessed man: it's irrelevant how he got to this circumstance. Let me say it again – this story is not about a good man gone bad or a bad man getting his just desserts. It's about a man, a human being, whose life was just as muddied and gray and messy as anyone else's. And whether the unclean spirits came about because of something he did or not doesn't matter. At least in the eyes of Jesus it doesn't. And as much as we love to think that our sense of justice is spot on, with people getting exactly what they deserve, Jesus shows us time and time again that it is a blessing that God does not operate this way. The road that brought the man to this point is not nearly as important as the road that will lead him into newness of life.

6 You see, when left to ourselves and our own sense of judgment, the result is a man who is completely cut off from community, a man who is left to fend for himself, heal himself, fix himself, find life himself. And the temptation in all of this is that it's so much easier this way. Good people get rewarded, bad people suffer the consequences and we don't actually have to have any empathy or understanding. We can actually stop seeing one another as human beings. Not my fault, not my problem.

But this is not who God has created and called us to be. 7 The church is not to be the community where things are so cut and dry, but the community that embraces the messiness of life. And if we are the Church, if we truly seek to follow in the ways of Jesus, then we must remember time and time again that Christ came so that you and I and we and all may be freed from the power of sin and death that so often blanket our lives. Christ's healing and grace do not depend on what you've done or what has brought you to the point of being in need of new hope and possibilities. Christ's purpose and his authority to carry it out are focused on one thing: that those who are bound may be liberated from their bondage. It's not about good and bad; it's about real, messy, sinner and saint human beings whom God loves more than we can fathom.

So we don't know a lot about this man in the story – at least not so much about his past. And frankly, it doesn't matter. Because the thing we do know, the thing that means more than anything, is that he is one who has seen and known and experienced the love and grace of God. He once was lost but has now been found. He was bound in sin and death and is now free. Just the way God created him to be. Just the way God created you and me to be. 8 Unafraid of the nuance and complexity of our human lives, God in Christ Jesus sets out into this world, with abounding grace in hand, to bring all to newness of life, the good and the bad and everyone in between, the right and the wrong, the deserving and underserving, the sinners and the saints. You and me and all the messy, broken human beings who long for just a little more love, a little more understanding, a little more grace – grace that God pours out upon our lives, even when we don't deserve it. And as it turns out, it's better that way. Thanks be to God!