

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

Legion

Jesus asked “What is your name?”

“Legion” he responded or “Mob” as Eugene Peterson translates.

Although this is a story of physical healing it is so much more than that. This is a story of the restoration of an individual’s identity. “The demoniac’s response to Jesus is one of the more heartbreaking verses in scripture. Asked for his name the man replies that he has none; or, more accurately, he says that his name is “Legion” that is, “multitude.” Oppressed by too many demons to count, he has lost himself in the cacophony of their voices and has ceased being a self, an individual, a person. Hence he spends his days raving alone in the wilderness, a danger to himself and others, separated from his community and even himself.”¹

The cause of this mans affliction is undefined, but it is clearly so intense that it has influenced his whole way of being. His life is so out of control he doesn’t even know who he is anymore. It is possible that he is struggling with disease, mental illness, outside influences and/or so much more - we don’t really know - but there are ways we can relate.

How many of us have had moments in our lives where we have lost ourselves? You may or may not have struggled with mental illness or what has felt like demon possession. But many of us have found ourselves overwhelmed. Voices inside and out telling us where to go and how to be. Times of chaos that drive us not the expected success but extreme loneliness and despair.

Like this man at times we loose our identity. Work, finances, friends, family and social status dictate how we act, who we befriend, how we look and eventually who we are. Our place in life holds us captive. We receive labels. And assumptions are made about who we are, what we do and how we will respond. Even when those guides are not accurate at first if we remain in the midst of the voices eventually they become us.

Those of us who watched the movie Amal this week saw a picture of what that can look like. A son of a millionaire who had lost his place in this world. No amount of wealth was going to change that because he had forgotten who he was. He let the voices of power, wealth, and addiction dictate who he became.

¹ Lose, David “Feasting on the Word”

And yet Amal a poor rickshaw driver knew who he was. He knew he was his father's son, and he knew his purpose in the world. Nothing ever broke his knowledge of that - no matter how stressed he became, no matter what life threw his way he was grounded as the son of his father. And that gave him such purpose that a millionaire saw him and discovered that "the poorest of men can be the richest."

After watching the journey of Amal questions came to us. Questions of value and worth. The movie caused us to ask how we live. What things define us? What voices dictate who we and others are? And along with those questions today's scriptures then ask What are the names we call ourselves?

Jesus called out of this man the things that drove him away from being who he was created to be. Jesus freed him up to become a person. He restored him as a child of God. Salvation in this story is about restoration. "Salvation is holistic, bringing life to body, mind, spirit, and relationships."²

"It is said that when Martin Luther felt oppressed by the devil, he would take courage by shouting, "I am baptized!" In this way he grounded his confidence of salvation in God's external, objective act of drawing him into the Christian family"³ We too have a claim as a child of God, as a creation of the holy, as a beloved, chosen individual. We are not a no name brand, cheap or unworthy, we are well loved. And as Paul clearly dictates in Galatians not one of us is more worthy or chosen than the other.

I think our worthiness is hard for many of us to believe. We know who the chosen ones are. We have been given our place in the world. We may not have a cast system like India but we have a system just the same. And we know who is clean and unclean, chosen and not. Even in our healing methods we are labeled. One commentator told a story of a friend who for years went to AA. She stood in the group and said "Hello my name is ____ and I am an alcoholic. Until one day she found herself saying "Hello my name is ____ I am a child of God and an alcoholic." She rediscovered her identity. She became a testimony to that group of people reminding them she and they were more than their disease.

Jesus asks the healed man to do the same. As much as the man wants to go and journey with Jesus, Jesus asks him and the community to do the hardest thing of all. He tells him to go back home. Go back as a healed man and live with those who have guarded, bound and chained him. Go back and be witness to Gods power over evil. Show the capacity for change, healing and growth. He asks him to go back and live in the same place in his new identity as transformed and clean. Jesus wants healing for all the community not just for one man.

² Heath, Elaine A. "Feasting on the Word"

³ Lose, David "Feasting on the Word"

And so the community reacts. They see him restored and they become afraid. Perhaps its because they don't accept change is possible. We rarely do. Transformation upsets the social norms. If someone gets stronger people don't know what to do. Most often we don't trust change - we actually find ourselves setting people up to fail just in case they don't have it all together yet and we don't want to get caught trusting someone who is untrustworthy. But Jesus doesn't want us defining ourselves or others by our flaws, he holds us to our strengths.

Remember last week when the woman who had sinned washed the feet of Jesus and Simon didn't want to accept that she was forgiven. Jesus pointed out her humble, worshipful, generosity over Simon's judgement.

See, when we encounter the presence of the Holy there is a possibility that our life might find itself rearranged. Although healing and salvation make sense from a faith point of view our human instincts rarely trust it whether for ourselves or for others. The people in our story are so afraid of transformation that they ask the healer (Jesus) to leave. They have had enough change and transformation. After all if he keeps it up they too might need to live differently. Jesus' presence upsets the social order.

In systems counseling theory we believe that as one person becomes more differentiated (or self defined) and stronger the rest of the system will as well. The problem however is people rarely like it when an individual know's themself. People don't know what to do with those who are healthy, happy and self-defined. And most people especially don't like those who try to live in wholeness especially if they are supposed to be the sick one.

“Just as the man in this story seems to have no will of his own but is led to and fro by the demons within, we often resist change and flee to the familiar, living a life that makes no sense from a perspective of faith.”⁴ But like the characters in our stories we are welcomed to bring our insecurities and our flaws to the feet of Jesus who longs to see us restored.

This is a resurrection story. A transformation story. I am naive enough to believe that transformation is still possible. I actually believe that as we allow one another to bring our real selves to the table we will become more whole. It might be scary at first and we might not even believe it but what if we lived in faith and hope for ourselves and others. No I do not believe in magical remedies. I know transformation and wholeness are hard work - but I believe they can happy for individuals and community.

Imagine. What if our life was visibly changed? What if the life of the others we label in our lives was visibly changed? Would we be like the community of people who asked the healer to leave forfeiting any opportunity to further benefit from the power of the holy? What would we do if someone came to us and said they were healing or healed? Would we even give them a chance?

⁴ Shaffer, Richard. IBID

God's way is not our way. God's way is the way of wholeness and restoration.

Is God inviting you to recognize the healing place in someone?

What are the labels you place on yourself or others that you might need to soften?

Is God calling you to be healed?

Are their negative labels that you let define you?

Do you have a vice that you know you need to give up but it's just easier to remain the same?

Transformation is hard, scary even. But everything that our scripture tells us says it is possible.

Healing is possible - I actually believe that.

I also believe God might even invite us to lead others in the healing process as we are transformed.

I am going to invited you in a moment to take some time in silent prayer for healing. It may be healing for yourself, or for someone you love. But as you do that I invite you to pray in faith, hope and trust as people of the resurrection, life abundant story.