

“Time to Break the Chains”

Mark 5:1-20

Series: STEPS Week 5

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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One of the most stretching experiences of my life was the summer I worked as a student chaplain at the State Psychiatric Hospital in West Trenton, New Jersey. Until then I had never spent much time with people burdened by profound mental or psychotic afflictions. To be honest, at first I was afraid. I didn't know what they would do or say.

What help could I offer? I especially felt inadequate when it came to preaching at the Sunday chapel services. I hadn't written many sermons yet. I remember laboring over a message all week, desperately hoping my words would offer comfort and encouragement. I wanted to inspire and move these dear people with the love and grace of Jesus. Finally Sunday came. The residents filed into the little chapel. We sang some hymns, I read the Scripture and began to preach. I poured my heart and soul into it. Most sat quietly and listened. Then unexpectedly, in the middle of the sermon, one worshiper rose, came forward, and stood right in front of me. I thought, “Wow, I have really inspired this guy. He wants to commit his life to Jesus. Maybe I should stop, do an altar call right now and quit while I'm ahead. I paused and said, “Hi Larry, Do you want me to pray for you?” I wondered what had so moved him. Larry replied, “Preacher, do you have the key to the bathroom?” That's what moved him.

Over time, I learned to stop being afraid. I stopped seeing the residents as a diagnosis. They became Frank and Karen and Sue and George. Sadly, a number were stuck in a revolving door. After discharge they wound up back in the hospital. Some simply didn't want to leave.

I am sometimes asked, “When Jesus cast out the demons in the Bible, was he really curing mental illness?” I am not an expert in mental illness or demonic influences. I *can* say mental illness is an illness of the mind just as physical illnesses are illnesses of other parts of the body. These are diseases and, thank God, today we have medicines and treatments that help heal both mind and body. But this doesn't tell the whole story. I believe we also have a spirit and there are diseases of the spirit. That is where the devil gains entrance to our lives. So the question is not, “Are people with mental illness under the influence of demons?” but rather “Are any of us free from the influence of the evil one?” We're all chained by something:

- Guilt about your past.
- Fears about your future.
- Shame about who you are.
- Sorrow about what you've done or did not do.
- Worry about what someone else will do.
- Anger about what someone did to you.
- Obsessions you cannot shake.

The truth is: you may have several of these links in the chain that binds you. And if you happen to be personally free from all these, there is a good chance you are entangled with someone who

is bound by physical, mental, emotional and/or spiritual chains. The closer we are tied to someone – especially our family members and friends – the more their chains bind us.

Jesus is on a search and rescue mission. He comes to chain up the devil and unchain us. If you are reading the Gospel of Mark passages with us you probably noticed how many times Jesus deals with demons. When the religious leaders accuse Jesus of being the devil, He replies,

“How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man’s house. Mark 3:23-27

Doesn’t this sound like a WWF Smackdown? Jesus has come to put the hurt on the devil. He’s going to tie him in knots, take over his house, take him down. Why? It’s not the devil’s house. The world belongs to Jesus and He wants it back. But that’s not all. Jesus wants to take off our chains. He does this in one of the scariest Gospel stories. It reads like a Stephen King novel.

It’s a dark and stormy night when Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee. After He wakes up and tells the storm to shut up they meet up with a man who is all messed up.

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones. Mark 5:1-5

Talk about your nightmare on Elm Street. This guy’s address is a cemetery. His neighbors are dead people. He is completely out of control. He is so strong nobody can stop him. Like the Incredible Hulk he breaks through the handcuffs on his cuffs, the manacles on his ankles. He haunts the sleep of his neighbors with terrifying midnight shrieks that echo off the hills.

There are, of course, two sides to his story. Look first at the people who live near the man. It’s cruel for his neighbors to chain his hands and feet. They have mixed motives. They fear what he might do to them. They know he is a danger to himself. Perhaps they restrain him so they can feed him, keep him safe or stop him from cutting himself. It is the only way they know to control him. And it does not work. Behind the scenes in this nightmare is his family. We can’t imagine what they have gone through with him and why they are nowhere to be seen in this scene. They say it takes a village to raise a child. Well this village has run out of options.

Who is the out of control person in your life?

- The teen who experiments with risky behavior, who has no interest in school, who seems bent on self-destruction.
- The person who constantly lies, hides and covers up the truth.

- The spouse who flirts and is unfaithful.
- The one whose rage comes out of nowhere.
- The one whose spending, hoarding, gambling is escalating.
- The one who drugs or drinks and thinks it's not a problem.
- The one who sinks in a swamp of self-pity.

You have tried everything: discipline and denial, threats and therapy, begging and bargaining, medications and ultimatums, and on and on. Some of these work. Some don't. Some seem to make it worse. The more they chain him the stronger he becomes. Why can't they control him? He can't control himself. Maybe this is the truth you are unwilling to admit: the reason you can't control your out of control person is they can't control themselves. If they can't, you can't.

Let's look at the story from the other side. A shrieking nearly naked man races toward Jesus. He is scarred and scary. When he is within inches of Jesus, he suddenly falls to his knees. Shouting as loudly as he can he cries, "Leave me alone Jesus, Son of the Most High God. Swear on your Father's Name that you won't torture me." From this frightening collision we learn a few things: The man everyone else fears is afraid of Jesus. The one no one can subdue, submits to Jesus. And though the wild man knows Jesus can heal him, he begs Jesus to go away.

Jesus is not scared off like the rest of the villagers. He doesn't shackle, attack or torture the man. He simply asks a question: "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." (Mark 5:9) That's creepy. No wonder the village can't tie him up. There's a whole city inside him. No. Not just a city. There's an army in there...an army of 6,000 demonic soldiers. His body is enemy occupied territory. Do you hear the flip-flop between "me" and "we"? Buried beneath that division of demons there is a single scared soul. Yet despite all their tormenting, he still prefers the devils he knows to the Deliverer he doesn't. So he begs his Healer, his Deliverer, his Savior to go away. Now I know you are probably not wrestling with an army of demons. But if you are struggling with something beyond your control – a habit, a hurt or a human in your life– you can learn how to deal with your demons by looking at his life.

Our demons make us dependent. It is no fun to host 6,000 unclean spirits in your soul. Yet at first the man begs Jesus not to drive them out. He takes on their name. He becomes one with them. Why? As strange as it may seem, problems provide comfort. Smoking, drinking, eating, spending, angry outburst, bouts of self-pity – They make you feel powerful or in control. They relieve stress. They draw sympathy. They kill the pain. No wonder prescription painkillers are the addiction of choice in our day. The relief, however, is only temporary. The price you pay for that relief is extremely high. Smokers know cigarettes cause cancer. Yet the short term pleasure of a smoke makes them so dependent they are literally dying for a cigarette.

Our demons are complicated. The best decision I ever made, after giving my life to Jesus, was marrying my wife Lisa. Not just because she is a beautiful wife, a wonderful mother and grandmother and a perfect match for me but also because she is a physical therapist and I suffer from back pain. When my back goes out I run to her - actually I crawl to her – and she works her magic on my back. Over time however, she discovered I have several different problems which sometimes require opposite treatments. What's her professional opinion about me? I'm complicated.

The man does not have a single demon. There is a legion in there. He is complicated. When dealing with our problems and issues, we should not assume there is just one issue and one solution. There may be physical, emotional, mental and spiritual problems. This is why, when someone comes to me for help, I never simply say: just pray about it. Pray is essential. But professional counseling, medical treatment, support groups and other resources may also be needed.

Our demons separate us from God and others – The man drives everyone away. He begs Jesus to go away. He lives among the tombs which means he is already dead. Often when someone is caught in the grip of a problem they become so self-centered they push everyone, including God, out of their lives. The more others try to help, the stronger they resist until finally family and friends give up. They drive off the one person who can truly free them: the Lord.

Our demons bargain with God and others - When Jesus commands the spirits to leave they try to strike a deal with the Lord. And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." Mark 5:10-12

When I first came to Woodside I was a little worried. Some mispronounced my last name as HOGlund and that was a problem in a church that ran an annual pig roast. Pigs, being unclean and unkosher, are the perfect hideout for unclean spirits. The Legion begs to go there so it can hang out in the local pig sty until Jesus leaves and then reenter the man. When someone is in the grip of a habit, they make deals, vows, promises to never do it again and half-hearted attempts to stop. None of it works. You can't go half-way. You can't make a deal with the devil. Why?

Our demons destroy us and others – This man is cutting himself with stones. After 25 years of counseling teenagers, psychologist Madeline Levine is witnessing a new breed of unhappy teenagers—smart, successful, and privileged kids who feel utterly lost. Such as the 15-year-old girl who is "bright, personable, highly pressured by her adoring, but frequently preoccupied parents." The girl is also "very angry." Levine quickly recognizes the girl's "cutter disguise"—a long-sleeve t-shirt pulled halfway over her hand, with an opening torn in the cuff for her thumb to hide self-mutilating behaviors: cutting, piercing, or burning. When the young girl pulls back her sleeve there is a single word cut into her forearm: "EMPTY."

I tried to imagine how intensely unhappy my young patient must have felt to cut her distress into her flesh The most common thing I hear in my office from the kids is, "I'm fake." The surface always looks good. But when you get to what's going on beneath these kids' T-shirts, they feel empty.¹

The demon says it's your friend. It promises you pleasures. But it's using you so it can destroy every relationship in your life. Then it will destroy you and spread to someone else.

¹ Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege* (Harper Perennial, 2008), pp. 3-5.

How can we be free from its control? Do what this man did: go to Jesus your Healer. He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region. Mark 5:13-17

Instead of staying in the pig sty, the deviled ham stampeded down the hillside and drowned in the sea: swine lake. In the Bible, the sea is the passageway to the Abyss – the dark underworld where the demons are imprisoned. Jesus gave the demons their wish and accomplished His will.

When the villagers run to see what happened, they find a resurrection. The man once bound and chained by a legion of demons, who lived among the dead, is alive again. And the people are disturbed. They are angry at losing their livestock. Yet they fear this stranger from the other side of the sea who is more powerful than 6,000 demons. They beg Jesus to go away. The legion-free man wants to go with Him. Jesus says no.

“Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed. Mark 5:19-20

You and I cannot heal the spiritual diseases in people’s lives. But Jesus can. He is more powerful than all the demons hell can unleash. Follow Him. Walk fearlessly in His power. Our role is not to get chained up in other people’s problems, but to lead them to the One who can tie up their demons and set them free. It’s messy, difficult, long term work. Along the way it will definitely cost you some pigs. But what’s more important to you: pigs or people?

And if Jesus has set you free, go tell others what the Lord has done for you and how He has had mercy on you. Jesus wants to unchain other people through you. They will be amazed. And so will you.