“Dealing With Our Demons ... Or Not!”

Texts: Mark 5: 1-20

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In all my years as a pastor/preacher, I don’t think I have ever used J. D. Salinger’s infamous novel, The Catcher in the Rye, before. But then, why would I? A book that was banned in many school districts; a book that got teachers suspended or fired for assigning to their class. We could not read it in the school system I was a part of in North Carolina, but I did read it in college in the early 1960s. What brings it forward today as we raise the issue of “dealing with our demons ... or not!” is the fact that Holden Caulfield, the narrator and principal character in the book, comments on this episode in Jesus’ ministry:

“I like Jesus and all, but I don’t care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. Take the Disciples, for instance....They were all right after Jesus was dead and all, but while He was alive, they were about as much use to Him as a hole in the head. All they did was keep letting Him down. I like almost anybody in the Bible better than the Disciples. If you want to know the truth, the guy I like best in The Bible, next to Jesus, was that lunatic and all, that lived in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones ...”

I can understand why Holden Caulfield felt that he could relate to the unfortunate man possessed by demons, the man who was his own worst enemy. Salinger paints a portrait of Caulfield as a loner; someone who does not fit nor want to fit in to the culture around him. He had his demons and he nurtured them. Throughout the story, we see these demons play out in Holden’s somewhat privileged life.

We are all possessed by demons, and here is an opportunity to start dealing with them. Maybe your demon comes in a bottle of alcohol or a bottle of pills. Maybe your demon comes around a card table or a food table. Maybe your demons pull you off to the casinos, or the racetrack, or heaven forbid, the shopping malls. Ours is a culture haunted by demon possession. The question is - do you want to deal with them, exorcise them from your behavior ... or not?
Remember last week, when we were in the boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee? Jesus rises from his nap, stills the wind and the waters, chastises the disciples, then for all we know, goes back to sleep. But what is left for us to ponder is the question: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?” And if he has the power over the elements of nature, what power might he have over me? The power to change me? The power to ore-orient my life?

Well, isn’t interesting that as soon as they complete this journey across the Seas of Galilee, they have an answer to that question. They land in the Hellenistic area of the Gerasenes; it is Gentile territory. And nothing about it is kosher; everything is unclean: the demons, the tombs, the pigs, the very land itself. And in this alien place, where other rabbis would have no power, Jesus’ authority and healing power is just as great as it would be in Galilee.

God’s kingdom in Mark’s gospel comes with power, power to do things that humans cannot do on their own. It transforms and forces humans to perceive the truth that God’s kingdom best takes root when the marginalized, the outcasts, those struggling with things beyond their control are willing to be instruments of God’s healing grace. Last week, I referenced the twelve step programs designed to help people turn their lives over to a higher power and to admit that on their own they cannot exorcise their demons. People who are successful in such programs have chosen to deal with those demons and to allow that higher Spiritual Power (let’s just call it God) to work his amazing grace in their lives. Such was the case with the man in our text for today.

Being possessed by a demon was costly but his healing cost him too. He had to give up his life in service to Christ. What really happened to this man was that God made him a new creation. And it is this new creation, this new reality created by a healing, that may be the highest cost. A new creation suggests that something has changed. The old has passed away and the new has come. When God is in our midst, we shouldn’t expect things to stay the same. God is always creating something new. The cost of healing is that something changes not just for the healed person but also for the whole community.
Think about it! It was easier to accept the presence of a crazy person outside the boundaries of town than a healed man who will walk among them, confronting them with the reality of God’s transforming power in their midst. They fear the unrecognizable calm in this “new creation” because chaos with the demoniac was something they expected. Healing was abnormal and they didn’t know how to interact with this man anymore because he was different. He was made new. He had changed and not everyone can handle change, particularly one brought about by divine intervention!

In the presence of Christ, we may see ourselves for who we really are which is why the swine herders and the citizens of Gerasene wanted him to leave. Why, if he had stayed, they might have to deal with their own personal demons. In the presence of the healer and healing, reality is re-ordered. Healing and salvation are scary because it means a different way of life, a new order, a new reality, a new creation has arrived, and he is sitting in front of them, clothed and in his right mind. So Jesus prepares to leave, and the man whom Jesus had healed begs to go with him. But Jesus says “no,” and urges him to go home, and show them what mercy has been shown to him. Walk among the people of Gerasene and show them the power of God’s healing grace. And he did, and they were amazed.

At the conclusion of Catcher in the Rye, we understand that Holden has been committed to an institution in California to recover from a mental breakdown; he is in psychotherapy, but is still scared and alone, and metaphorically, living amidst the tombstones of his past. Remember how he brings forward this episode in the ministry of Jesus, and has some basic grasp of the flow of the gospels. The tragedy of Holden Caulfield is he can never get beyond “knowing” about Jesus, and “trusting” this Jesus to heal him of his demons.

Ultimately, dealing with our demons means trusting that God in Christ will do what he came here to do, in us and among us, and then commission us to tell others about the mercy he extended to us. So, we continue with the question, “Who is this man that even the winds and the waves obey him? Who is this man that even a legion of demons are cast aside at his command?” You and I know this Jesus, and the power he brings to his kingdom. And so the next question is a simple one: “Are you and I ready to trust this Jesus we claim to know to change your life? Are you ready to deal with your demons … or not?

Let us pray …