

PENTECOST FIVE

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Luke 8:26-39

"Set Free"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Today's miracle story appears right after the story about Jesus calming the stormy waves of the lake. Now Jesus steps from the boat and immediately meets another storm, this time in human form. A man possessed by demons.

The man seems so foreign to us. He's naked. He lives among the tombs, which is certainly appropriate since his life has become a living death; cut off from community with other human beings.

We tend to dismiss talk of people possessed by demons as simply the way people in olden days spoke about mental illness or a good plot for a horror movie. But even today, there are many forces that threaten to take control of our lives.

That's part of what we mean when, in our liturgy, we confess that *"we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves."*

What are some of the specific things that you or I might be captive to? What are the things that threaten to overwhelm you?

Is it job stress, or a lack of fulfillment in life? Is it heartache over a loved one who's battling a terrible illness?

Is it the life-crushing disease of depression? Are you feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of being a parent? Are you caught in an abusive relationship?

Or are you in bondage to selfishness and self-centeredness? Or is yours an addiction to alcohol, gambling, internet porn, or any of a dozen other addictions?

There are certainly many powers that threaten to take over and **suck the joy and happiness** out of life. So maybe, we can relate to this story of the demoniac living among the tombs, after all.

If we **give up the illusion that we're really in control of our lives** – then **maybe, just maybe**, we can see how this story might have **something to say to us**.

After all, this man was healed of his demons. Jesus drove them out, and we read that afterwards, *"the man sat at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind."*

Can Jesus do the same for you and me? Could it be that He still has the power to overcome the demonic powers that so often enslave us?

Lisa Dahill, in her book, Truly Present - Practicing Prayer in the Liturgy, says that what happens in worship on Sunday morning, especially in the liturgy of confession and absolution, can be similar to the healing of this demoniac.

When we confess our sins and hear the declaration of forgiveness – as if it is spoken by Christ himself – we can experience peace and be freed from the terrible powers that threaten to undo us.

I'd like to share some of her ideas. Dahill says that we all hunger to belong, to be loved and cherished. **God knows this hunger.** And every Sunday, God greets us – indeed **God comes running to embrace us, Sunday after Sunday.**

In worship, says Dahill, we enter consciously into the presence of **the One who loves us more passionately than we can imagine.**

But, strange as it seems, we may resist. Here's how Dahill puts it:

"You'd think that, brought out of the chaos of the world and invited into this love, we would gratefully relax into God's arms and let this reality of love claim us completely. And sometimes we do. But at other times we resist. We may come through the church's doors and go through the motions of prayer.

Dahill concludes: *But somehow we find ourselves unable to cross that internal threshold as easily as the external one.*

On some level, obvious when we choose to stay home from worship but present often even when we're here, we resist God. And this resistance to God is seen throughout our lives."

In many ways we resist accepting this love into which we are so freely and eagerly invited, **this healing that our souls so desperately need.**

Why do we resist God? Wouldn't you think we'd be running as fast as we can to the One whose presence promises **healing, consolation, and joy?**

And yet we resist. We resist God because we've become **strangely comfortable in our condition of bondage.** We resist because we're human, because we're sinners, and because, somehow, **we're aware that letting go into God will cost us.**

We resist because **accepting God's love at the very core of ourselves will change us entirely.** And **we don't want to be changed.**

And so we resist. But, thanks be to God, **our resistance is not the end of the story.** Because in baptism we've been **joined to Christ's death & resurrection** and we are **freed of our former helplessness in the face of sin.**

Most Sundays we begin our worship with a corporate confession of sins. (We skipped it today for a reason, as you'll soon see.) But we often just go through the motions, not taking it very seriously. It's **one more way we resist God's love and healing.** Because **most of us don't want to own up to our true sinfulness,** confession of sin seems depressing and humiliating.

Alcoholics who have hit bottom and are now in recovery report that it's **exhilarating to finally tell the truth about their lives.**

But for most of us, **such radical honesty and truth-telling** sounds **worse than death itself.**

So **why would anyone willingly confess their true sins before God?** Quite simply: **this is the Christian life.** It's the very shape of our lives as redeemed children of God.

Martin Luther said that the Christian life is a daily dying a rising – dying to the old, sinful self, and rising as a redeemed child of God; a new creation.

We are baptized into Jesus' own death and **stripped of all that separates us from God.**

The Bible and experience declare that by letting go we are set free. By admitting even our ugliest sins to God, we can be healed of them.

If we take confession seriously, it becomes an opportunity to **bring the weakest, most shameful and hidden parts of ourselves** into the open.

And even though we **may be terrified of what that might mean,** if we try it, we'll find that it's **an experience of incredible liberation and grace.**

You see, like the man possessed by demons in our Gospel, our innermost parts may be **infested with self-hatred; wild with terror or rage.**

We're horrified with ourselves and we imagine **GOD, TOO, MUST LOOK ON US WITH REVULSION AND TURN AWAY.**

But **see just how tender and compassionate Jesus is.** He **doesn't despise the demon-possessed man or woman within us.** He doesn't run away in disgust.

Instead he **sees THIS HORRIBLE INSANE PART OF US and loves us anyway.**

He **sees the human being hidden amid the tombs and filth of our hearts.** He **casts out our demons and loves us, clothes us, and restores us to our right mind** and to **our life in community with others.**

JESUS IS AMAZING GRACE. He is tenderness.

And it is through confession that we have a chance to **invite this tender savior ever more fully into ourselves.**

Whatever is within us, no matter how frightening, or repugnant, we open to Jesus and allow our whole selves to come into the **blazing daylight of his amazing unconditional love,** where it will be **burned away.**

What an incredible mercy.

And **WHAT A TREMENDOUS LIBERATION.** All the energy we've been using to hide, even from ourselves, the parts we are afraid of; **all of that is suddenly released.**

We are **free to tell the truth with all boldness** - released to live in freedom as God's own beloved children.

And we discover that **far from keeping us somehow obsessed with sin**, authentic confession moves us into a radical freedom from all powers and principalities in the world.

True confession leads into a life of **praise of God and service to others**.

In a month, I will lead us in the Order for Confession and Forgiveness on page 1 of the bulletin.

And I invite you to **open yourself up to the amazing love of Jesus Christ**. Share with him your **inmost thoughts** – those things you're **most ashamed or most afraid of**.

It's difficult. It's scary.

But Jesus will not turn away in disgust. He loves you just as you are. And Jesus promises to **destroy once again** those **powers of sin, death, and the devil which** would control you and separate you from Him and his love. Amen.