

Can you imagine what this man's life must have been like?

We don't know when his demonic possession began. We don't know if he was a young boy or if it was a more recent development. What the text *does* tell us, however, is that he doesn't wear clothes and that he doesn't live as a real member of this community. Instead of a house, he lives in the tombs—and it doesn't sound like this is a choice he has made for himself. Later, we learn that he is actually kept under guard, shackled up, to keep him from running off into the wilds.

That sounds awful, doesn't it? And we might judge his community harshly for treating him this way. But I think, as misguided as they are, that they truly *believe* they are doing what's best for him.

As soon as the demons leave the man, they enter the herd of swine and the pigs drown themselves. It's possible, that with driving him out to the wilds, that the demons were trying to kill the man, as well. Maybe the community saw that. Maybe the community locked him up and kept a guard to keep him alive, to keep him from hurting himself or others—not *just* as a punishment. And, if that's the case, then they were doing what they thought was right. It's not excusing their behavior, but recognizing that they didn't know what else to do.

Their attempts at help, however, didn't do anything but keep him bound.

As I read this story this week, I couldn't help but think about all the things in our society that we do, ostensibly to “help,” but that actually keep people bound, that keep people in cycles of sickness, or debt, or poverty.

I thought about predatory lending practices. You know, the ones that advertise how they can get you your paycheck days or weeks early, without clearly and obviously spelling out the monstrous interest that will have people paying that loan back for months, years, or the rest of their lives...if they don't have to file for bankruptcy, that is.

And I thought about some charity practices that focus more on helping the person *doing* the action feel better than on what the person *receiving* actually needs. The most visible example of this I can think of is after natural disasters when communities are inundated with things people have chosen to donate...but not always what those affected could use at that time.

There is a story about the relief efforts in Honduras after a hurricane: desperately needed medical supplies were on their way in a cargo plane, but the plane couldn't

land because the tarmac was full of things that weren't part of that initial, critical response, things like stuffed animals, bedding, and even expired food.ⁱ The intentions are wonderful. It is a beautiful, Christ-like impulse to want to help when others are hurting. But if we don't take the time to stop and realize what is *most* helpful—in the case of natural disasters, usually money so that it can be directed precisely towards where it's needed most!—we are keeping folks and organizations bound longer than they need to be.

And I also thought about the way that we respond to people who are unhoused. As a society, we're decent at donating food, clothes, etc., especially those of us who call ourselves disciples of Christ. But if we are not listening to how people ended up on the streets, we are missing the big picture. If we are addressing only the symptoms (hunger, lack of shelter, hygiene, etc.) instead of also the causes (poverty, mental illness, addiction, lack of education and resources, unaffordable housing, etc.)...we are keeping people bound up in that unjust system.

Jesus offers another way. Jesus breaks the chains.

Jesus takes time to see this man, and see the problem at the heart of it all: the demons. He asks their name. Martin Luther said, "A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."ⁱⁱ And that's because only by recognizing what something actually is, can we take steps forward to address it. That's what Jesus does, gets to the name of the issue: Legion, these many demons who torment this man without rest. The running off into the wild and acting disruptive is merely the symptom.

Jesus talks to the man, finds out the name of the *real* problem...and then *he addresses it*.

Jesus casts out the demons and the man is freed. He no longer has to be chained up. He can rejoin his community. He can live in a *house* again, for crying out loud, instead of a tomb! His shackles have come off.

Siblings in Christ, what does this story mean for us?

Casting out demons doesn't seem to be part of our daily lives, but there are implications here that *do* impact the way we want to live.

If we want to live as a disciples of Christ, how can we follow Jesus' lead?

Let's think about those three steps Jesus took:

First, *talking* to the man. It seems so simple that it shouldn't have to be said but, well, there's a reason I'm saying it! All too often we assume that we know what people need or what they want, without ever actually getting their input.

In a previous call, we had a disabilities ministry group that worked with young people with both developmental and intellectual disabilities. The first thing they taught me was that *they* could (and would!) tell me what they were able to do. I am reluctant to admit that I had assumptions about who would be capable or who would be willing to read, or acolyte, or even serve as assisting minister—and these assumptions were quickly proven wrong. Sure, there were some adjustments made here and there, but I learned to never presume to know what others needed.

By building relationships with them, they showed me what they were capable of and I'm sad to say, it was often more than I initially assumed. If I hadn't taken the time to listen, I would have never known. They would have been excluded and the congregation would have lost out on being a full expression of the Body of Christ.

What did Jesus do after he listened? He got to the name of the real problem.

This is a tricky one, because it often involves much of our preconceived biases and can be skewed quite a bit by our world view.

Are there really good schools and bad schools? Or are there just schools with great funding that pay teachers well and have parents and caregivers who have time or money for extra help outside of school in the form of tutors when needed, and schools where teachers have to pay for most of their supplies out of pocket, classrooms are bursting at the seams, incomes are lower so parents and caregivers work more hours but still can't afford tutors and older siblings have to provide childcare for younger ones?

Is there really an issue with people not wanting to buy or cook quality food? Or have we made "healthy food" such an idol that people feel pressured to by "fresh," everything when frozen and canned produce can have very close nutritional profiles at often a fraction of the cost. And do we allow big companies to push out local grocery stores before marking up their own groceries, offering limited selection, and leaving communities in a food desert where it is very difficult to get the groceries you want.

Is it really just a given that 50% of people released from prison are incarcerated again because they just make poor choices? Or does our society set them up for failure by making it so hard for them to find jobs, by releasing them back where they were arrested with no support system other than the one that probably helped land them in jail in the first place, by providing few resources for mental health on the outside?

Do you see? It's simple to point at results or symptoms and jump to conclusions about how we got here. It's a lot of work and research and thought to figure out the heart of the matter. But only by doing that, can we start to make a difference.

And that's step three. Jesus *addresses* that real problem.

And the "real problems" are usually systemic injustices presenting themselves in different ways. Lack of access to certain resources, prejudice, inadequate mental and physical healthcare. That's what the demons are counting on. As long as the forces of sin and death can keep us focused on the minutiae, they're safe. They want us to avoid talking about and addressing the systems that create these issues...but that's not Jesus' way.

When we leave here today, when we go about our lives, I encourage you to think like this when you encounter someone or some institution struggling. What do they have to say about it and how are they feeling? What's the root of that struggle? What needs to be addressed to make a difference?

After all, it's what Jesus would do.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2013/01/09/168946170/thanks-but-no-thanks-when-post-disaster-donations-overwhelm>.

ⁱⁱ <https://tollelege.net/2008/03/24/a-theologian-of-the-cross-calls-the-thing-what-it-actually-is-by-martin-luther>.