

Clackamas United Church of Christ
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Jesus Calls Us to Bless Immigrants

There are some Bible stories that increase my anxiety whenever I preach on them. I never know exactly how to handle these stories. They make me uncomfortable. Part of me thinks that they are merely an aspect of an ancient worldview, and we moderns have progressed so far beyond them that maybe we should just ignore these passages.

These biblical stories are about demon possession. I always feel like I have to be especially careful with these stories because they are fraught with difficulties. Are these stories about literal demons? Are they more about what we today call mental health? And we see quite a few corrupt ministers on television making a lot of money by exorcizing fake demons from people who seem to be in need of healing. Certainly, what Jesus does in the Gospels is not that.

So I want you to know that I have trouble with this passage, but I do think that it has an underlying message of Good News for our world today.

Jesus was traveling outside of Jewish territory into the land of a people called the Gerasenes to bring the Good News to them. And right at the beginning of this story we find something significant. The Jewish story actually starts with a man named Abraham and a woman named Sarah. God chose Abraham and Sarah. They were the chosen people, but God chose them with a purpose. God blessed Abraham and Sarah, along with their descendants, so that they would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Now, throughout the Bible we find different strands. One strand says, "No, we are the chosen people and our chosenness is tribal, which means that we can keep the blessing for ourselves."

But then we find another strand that calls us beyond ourselves by reminding us that we are blessed so that we will be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Much of the Bible is a struggle between these two strands. Are we blessed for ourselves? Or do we exist as a people who are blessed in order to bless others?

As a good Jew, Jesus picked one of these strands. He picked the strand that claimed we are blessed in order to share that blessing with others.

And so Jesus went to the "others." He went to the land of the Gerasenes in order to share God's blessings with them, too.

Jesus and his disciples went out of their comfort zones and into a village of strangers. Would these strangers accept him and his Good News? Would they reject him? And why would anyone reject the Good News that Jesus offers?

As soon as Jesus stepped out of the boat, he was confronted by a man with demons. This man lived just outside of the city in a cemetery of tombs. He lived in the place of death. And for him, it was social death. Instead of trying to bless this man, the people of the town cursed him. They exiled him and tied him down with chains and shackles in an effort to keep him excluded from their presence.

When this man escaped his chains and came to Jesus, Jesus asked him his name. The demons inside of the man answered that their name was Legion, for they were many.

Legion was the name of a Roman military unit of roughly 6,000 soldiers. There was a Roman legion stationed near the Gerasenes. The Legion made sure that the Gerasenes played by the oppressive rules of Rome, and if they didn't, the Legion used violence to get their way.

So when the demons say that their name is Legion, they made a political statement about militarism. The man was possessed by a Legion of demons. The land of the Gerasenes was occupied by the Legion of demonic forces of political and military violence. And the man's body was possessed by those demonic force.

The man went to Jesus and the Legions asked, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God." This is another political statement. Who was the Son of God in the ancient Roman world? The Emperor. To name someone else as the Son of God was high political treason.

But the demons knew the truth. The Emperor was an imposter. The true Son of God was Jesus.

But I want you to know that this is not merely a pious statement about Jesus. This is about two different ways of life.

To claim to be the Son of God was a claim about who God truly is. The Son is a reflection of the Father. The Emperor's claim to be the Son of God was to claim that God was like the Emperor who used violence, force, and aggression against his enemies. Under this worldview, God was a God of violence.

But Jesus was the true Son of God. God wasn't like the Emperor. God was like Jesus. God refuses to use violence against God's enemies. Rather, God loves seeks to care for all people, including God's enemies, because God is love.

So when the man who was possessed by demons came to Jesus, Jesus refused to demonize him. Jesus refused to be like the people in the village who shackled him and exiled him to a

place of social death. Rather, Jesus blessed him. He humanized the man by ordering the demons to leave his body. The demons left and the man was healed and in his right mind.

You would think that the town's people would celebrate the fact that this man was healed, but instead they responded with fear. So much fear that they requested that Jesus leave their town. In other words, they rejected Jesus.

Why did they reject Jesus' message? In part because the man possessed by demons was their scapegoat. The people knew that this man was crazy, which meant that they knew they were sane. They knew that this man was evil, which meant that they were good. The people didn't trust in their own God-given goodness, so they grasped onto goodness by comparing themselves with someone they could label as evil.

But according to the story, the people had nothing to fear from Jesus. Because the politics of Rome was about violence, domination, and exclusion. But the politics of Jesus are about nonviolence, inclusion, and love.

The problem is that while this story is part of the ancient worldview, our culture has not progressed very far beyond it. The politics of violence, militarism, and scapegoating continue to possess us today. I know that this spirit infects me.

I firmly believe that Jesus continues to call his followers to go out of our comfort zones in order to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. I firmly believe that God has blessed us so that we may be a blessing to all the families of the earth. I firmly believe that Jesus calls us into a different kind of politics, one where we restructure our society so that we bless all the families of the earth, including immigrant families who come to the US seeking asylum.

But we have discovered that our Government is not blessing these families. Rather, we are cursing them. Like the people of the town, we send these families off into the exile of detention centers. As a Government, we the people are required to provide "[safe and sanitary](#)" conditions for these families. But we have discovered during the last few days that migrant children are forced to sleep on cold concrete floors while the lights remain on. These are conditions that are not safe and can only lead to sleep deprivation. They are not provided soap or toothpaste.

Like the man in our story, these immigrants are exiled to a place of death. But unlike the man, these immigrants are not possessed by demons. A government that treats immigrants in that way is possessed by demons.

And here I want to be careful because I am tempted to define my goodness against certain politicians by labeling them as bad, but when I do that, I'm acting like the town's people who grasped for goodness by defining someone else as evil.

We need to continue to do the work of following Jesus, of going out of our comfort zones as we struggle for justice so that all of the families of the earth will be blessed. As we do this work, it's

important to not label other people as the enemy. Our enemy is not flesh and blood. Our enemies are policies brought forth by any political party that dehumanize and even demonize our fellow human beings.

So as we take on the mission of following Christ

May we go beyond our own comfort zones.

May we challenge the political and militaristic forces that demonize.

And may we seek to be a blessing to one another and to all the families of the earth. Amen.