



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

4th Sunday after Epiphany: January 31, 2021

Sermon Title: “Four Lessons”

Gospel Text: Mark 1:21-28

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” That’s the question the demons ask Jesus, through the voice of the man whose body they possessed. What a haunting and unnerving scene that must have been. It’s one I’ve not experienced and one, quite frankly, I hope I never witness. But having said that, I concede that the question the demons pose is an important one, and indeed a universal question that I think we all ask at one time or another in this life. “What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth?” After all, we each know, better than anyone else, all our flaws and imperfections. In the vastness of creation and limitlessness of eternity, we have to wonder why the most powerful and authoritative force of all – Jesus of Nazareth – takes *any* interest in *us*.

And so today we will consider the demons’ question, because the answer Jesus provides sheds enormous light on who you are, and what Jesus has to do with you. I’ll lay it all out by sharing four important lessons we can draw from today’s Gospel.

Lesson 1: Jesus’s entire mission is to draw you closer, heal you, make you whole, and save you. Consider the implications of what I’ve just said. *Everything* the Bible tells us about Jesus - his birth in Bethlehem, his teaching throughout Galilee and Judea, and his death and resurrection in Jerusalem – *everything* is centered on blessing *you*.

Sometimes we drift from this most fundamental of beliefs because it seems so contrary to our normal experience, where it appears we are constantly at each other’s throats in this competitive dog-eat-dog world of ours. But scripture is crystal clear on this point. As we read in John 3:17, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

We see this *in action* in today’s story from Mark’s Gospel. It was not an accident that Jesus went to *that* particular synagogue in Capernaum on the day a demonically possessed man was in attendance. Jesus was there because he loved that man and desired to *draw him closer*. But did Jesus do so in order to chastise or punish the man? No. Jesus *healed* him, by casting out the demon. In doing so, Jesus brought *wholeness* to the man. Jesus enabled the man to be his true self again, the person Jesus created him to be. By freeing the man from the things that oppressed him, Jesus set the man on the pathway of *eternal salvation*.

What was true of the demon-possessed man in the synagogue 2,000 years ago is equally true of you today. It’s no accident that you’re hearing these words today. Jesus has *drawn* you closer to his life-giving Word. Why? Not to punish you; it’s so Jesus can *heal* you of the unholy

things that are dominating your life and distracting you from the things which are truly important. Jesus is revealing these distractions to you, so that you can be free of them, because in that freedom you will be made *whole*. You will rediscover your true self again, the person Jesus created you to be. And in that freedom, Jesus has set *you* on the pathway of eternal *salvation*.

Lesson 2: You belong in church. No exceptions. This lesson focuses on *where* today's Gospel story took place. It was in a synagogue. We often think of synagogues and churches as places where holy things are discussed, and where only holy people are welcome. I would certainly agree that holy things *should* be our primary topic in a place like Grace Lutheran, especially in the midst of an activity like worship.

But it's a mistake to think that only *holy people* are welcome in such a place. As the old expression goes, "church isn't a museum for saints; it's a hospital for sinners." *All* of us who gather at church, beginning with the pastors, are less than perfect people. But that's the *whole point* of church. If we were perfect, we wouldn't need either the church *or* Jesus.

You see, what was true of the demon-possessed man in the synagogue 2,000 years ago is equally true of you today. No matter what you've done, how rotten you feel about yourself, how fragile your faith may be, or how subpar your piety has become, never, *ever* exclude yourself from church. That's as foolish as a sick person avoiding the doctor. Church is where you belong. No exceptions.

Lesson 3: Jesus will send help even when you can't help yourself. For this lesson, focus on what the demon-possessed man in the story did. Did you notice it? That's right – he did absolutely *nothing*. The demons had such control of him that he was unable to even *pray* for deliverance or *beg* for mercy.

But Jesus did for him what he could not do for himself. Jesus did much of this directly, as a gift of grace, by intervening for the man's sake and bringing physical and spiritual healing and liberation. But the man received some indirect help too. Just think how uncomfortable it must have been for the congregation to have a demon-possessed man in their midst. They would have had many reasons to exclude him or eject him from their assembly. But they didn't, and as a result, the man was transformed.

What was true of the demon-possessed man in the synagogue 2,000 years ago is equally true of you today. If you feel you don't have the right words to say or right actions to take to secure the divine deliverance you so desperately need, *do not despair; do not lose hope; do not be afraid*. Jesus will help you even if you can't help yourself. Trust *him*. And rejoice in the many people he will send your way to assist in your deliverance.

Our fourth and final lesson from today's Gospel: You have a name. This might seem an odd lesson to draw from today's Gospel, because we never do learn the name of the man Jesus healed. But I'm sure you can imagine the horrible, demeaning, dehumanizing labels that others in his community likely applied to him. Have *we* been guilty of doing that to *others*?

Have others done it to *us*? And have there been times when *we* have even applied hateful labels to *ourselves*?

As I told you in Lesson One, Jesus's entire mission is to draw you closer, heal you, make you whole, and save you. That means you have *inherent* worth and value. You are *not* the sum total of the labels that have been affixed to you. *You have a name, and it is "beloved child of God."* It was a name publicly affirmed at your baptism, a name you'll carry throughout this life and into eternity, and a name given to you by Jesus as a gift of grace. That name forms your core identity.

What was true of the demon-possessed man in the synagogue 2,000 years ago is equally true of you today, as well as the 3 children baptized at Grace this weekend. You have a name, and it is "beloved child of God."

And so there you have it – four lessons from today's Gospel. (1) Jesus's entire mission is to draw you closer, heal you, make you whole, and save you. (2) You belong in church. No exceptions. (3) Jesus will send help even when you can't help yourself. (4) You have a name. But if four lessons are too much to remember, then let's sum it all up in a single little phrase we've all heard a million times and sometimes dismiss because of its familiarity. *Jesus loves you.* Please don't forget that. *Jesus loves you.* It's really that simple. Thanks be to God. Amen.