After last week’s storm at sea, Jesus and the disciples have at last reached the far shore—the country of the Gerasenes, a Gentile region. No sooner have they stepped out of the boat, however, when a new storm assails them. Not wind and wave this time, rather a man possessed by an unclean spirit leaps out at them from a nearby graveyard. His hair is wild, his body unclothed, broken shackles hanging from his hands and feet. He is a fearsome and ferocious creature of a man. He races up at Jesus—and then falls to his knees before Him, crying out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” And immediately we know that this man is possessed by a demonic spirit, and this is the spirit speaking, not the man—for only the unclean spirits recognize Jesus for who He really is at this point in the story. “What is your name?” Jesus demands of the unclean spirit. And the unclean spirit answers, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” Legion not so much a name, as a description. Legion is the name of a Roman army unit of six thousand men. “My name is Legion,” says the unclean spirit—meaning that this poor man is tormented indeed. But as the chaotic forces of wind and wave had no power over Jesus last week, so this week we see that even the chaos of a Legion of demonic spirits has no power over Jesus. Jesus commands them to come out of this man. But they beg Him not to destroy them, but instead to send them into a nearby herd of pigs (remember that pigs were considered unclean animals under the Old Testament dietary laws). Jesus sends them into the herd of pigs. And instantly, the entire herd begins to rush down a steep hill into the sea—where they are all drowned in the sea. The sea—remember last week, when we spoke of how the sea was understood by the Jews of Jesus’ day as the symbol of that chaos and evil which continually threatens us and all of God’s good creation? So, Jesus is sending these unclean spirits back where they came from—binding them, destroying them, in the chaos from which they first sprang forth. And instantly, also, the formerly demon-possessed man is returned to his right mind, healed of his torment.

And right here is where the story really starts to get interesting! Oh, you thought that the naked demoniac leaping out of the graveyard and the demon-possessed herd of pigs rushing into the sea was the interesting part? No, that was just the set-up. Now is when things get really interesting. The herdsmen who had been tending the pigs, after no doubt standing there for a few moments with their jaws dropped and their eyes bugged out, regain their senses and rush into town to tell everybody what has just happened. I imagine that the first few folks to whom they told their tale might have wondered is maybe the herdsmen had now become demon-possessed. But, eventually, the whole town heads out to see for themselves what has happened.
And, upon arriving at the scene, they are immediately amazed and frightened and awe-struck and who knows what else. Because there, sitting calmly with his hands in his lap and fully clothed is the very one who, just a few moments before, they could not contain even with chains. And looking down the hill towards the sea, there they see exactly what the herdsmen had described – a whole herd of pigs drowned in the sea. And then they look at Jesus, the One who has made all this happen. They look at Jesus, who has done this powerful work of healing and wholeness and demon destruction. They look at Jesus – and begin to beg Him, beg Him, to go away. To go away from their region and never to come back. They beg Jesus to go away and leave them alone.

Maybe they were just concerned for the local economy. I mean, those pigs must have represented a significant investment on somebody’s part. Perhaps there was even a government contract to supply the occupying Roman army with fresh pork – now down the drain, or rather in the sea. A few more healing miracles like this one and the whole town would be bankrupt. And, let’s face it, Jesus Himself is the One who tells us what a tremendous obstacle money and the love of money can be for the life of faith. So maybe they begged Him to leave for financial reasons.

But I don’t think so – or, at least, I don’t think that was the main reason they begged Jesus to go away. I think they were just simply terrified of what it might mean for the whole of their lives to have a person, a power, like Jesus in the neighborhood. What it might mean to the whole fabric of their living if Jesus were to stay. It might well mean, for example, a complete disruption to their well-worn habits and values and beliefs. It might mean that things would begin to change – that they would have to change. It might mean new allegiances, new priorities, new ways of living, new goals to live for. What that crowd seems clearly to have understood is that it is not safe to have Jesus too close – if by “safe” we mean keeping things the way they have always been, keeping our lives the way they have always been. That to maintain the status quo – however sorry, unhappy, and lacking it may be – to keep the status quo it is best to keep Jesus at a safe distance, lest that power of His – even though it be healing power – lest that power of His break into your life and begin to turn things upside-down. Or, as Jesus no doubt would see it, right-side up. So, go away, Jesus. Not so close, Jesus. Keep your distance, Jesus. Which are, sadly, sentiments you and I too readily understand.

I’ve shared this with you before – it’s one of my favorite stories, because it provokes me to think about just this aspect of our relationship with Jesus every time I read it. It’s a story told by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. – Harvard professor and host of the wonderful PBS genealogy show, “Finding Your Roots”. In his autobiography, Gates tell of growing up in a small southern town where there were only two church choices available to the African-American community. One was the Walden Methodist Church – proper, dignified, orderly, and respectable. The one Gates and his family attended. And then there was the Holiness Church – that was not its denomination, that was its name, The Holiness Church. And while the Walden Methodists sat quietly in their pews during the sermon on Sundays, across the street at the Holiness Church people were shouting, dancing, praising, speaking in tongues – and, just in general, getting all carried away and turned around in Jesus. This is what Gates writes:

_The truth is, I always avoided the Holiness Church, because I was afraid of the power that I knew lived there. I had seen it in the_
way that people spoke about the church, the fear and awe in their eyes. I had seen how it had turned people around, even the most unlikely people, like . . . Vic Clay. Victor Clay had been a heathen and a hedonist. Then one day, as he tells it, he was walking out of the Holiness Church, was almost out the door . . . when the Spirit came upon him, spun him around, and propelled him back into the sanctuary . . .

Having seen the power that could make people forsake the world and stop their sinning . . . I avoided the Holiness Church, because I wanted to put myself out of harm’s way. I never wanted to believe that much, even at the best of times.3

“I never wanted to believe that much, even at the best of times.” We understand that, maybe even privately agree – as would, certainly, the Gerasene crowd who had witnessed what Jesus had done that day: “And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region.” Too much Jesus, and your life could really get turned around, turned upside-down. Or, as the Bible calls it, “healed”.

Or this, a story about Clarence Jordan, who founded Koinonia, the interracial Christian farming community in south central Georgia in 1941; and later was instrumental in the creation of Habitat for Humanity. In the early 1950’s, Koinonia was under serious attack, and Clarence asked his brother Robert – who would later become a Georgia state senator and a justice on the Georgia Supreme Court – he asked his brother Robert to provide legal representation for the Koinonia Community. Robert replied:

“Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.”
“We might lose everything too, Bob.”
“It’s different for you.”
“Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”
“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”
“Could that point by any chance be – the cross?”
“That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”
“Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you’re an admirer not a disciple.”
“Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”
“The question,” Clarence said, “is, ‘Do you have a church?’”4
“You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his.” Could Clarence Jordan be speaking about us, also? Keep your distance, Jesus. Not too close, Jesus. Go away, Jesus – lest your power turn out lives upside-down in the eyes of this world, if also right-side up in the eyes of the King and His Kingdom. Is He talking about us?

But, of course, that’s not how the story ends – with the Gerasene people begging Jesus to keep His distance, to go away from them and not come back. The story ends where it began – with that demon-possessed man, now formerly demon-possessed. At last made whole and his mind made right. And with his new clarity of mind, his newly healed perspective, he proceeds to do the exact opposite of the Gerasene crowd. The Gerasene crowd tells Jesus to go away – they do not want His healing power loose in their region, loose in their lives. But this former demoniac looks upon the One who has healed him – and he begins to beg Jesus that He might go with Jesus, that He might stay as close as possible to Jesus from now on, that he might draw closer to Jesus day by day. In other words, having been healed by Jesus, no way is he going to stay merely an admirer of Jesus. With all his heart, soul, mind, and strength he now wants, more than anything else, to be a disciple of Jesus.

Could that be us? Do we, have we, ever felt that way about Jesus? That sort of commitment – discipleship commitment? It begins in us in the same place it began for that once demon-possessed man. It comes when at last we allow His grace to enter into us, freely and fully. It begins in that moment when at last we come to comprehend the truly unmerited goodness of His gift of grace to us – that once we were lost, but now we are found, once we were blind, but now we see. It begins in that moment when grace gives rise to gratitude – and we let the power of Jesus begin to have its way in us, that healing power which cleanses and lifts our weary and heavy-laden souls. When at last His grace has brought us round to see that our lives can be something more than status quo – that our lives can be made to be good and abundant, holy and whole – if we will but beg to follow Him, if we will allow Him to draw near to us.

A hard-driving, very successful man hit bottom, spun out of control, crossed the median, and was headed the wrong way down an interstate at one hundred miles an hour. In other words, he fell from his prestigious position as a prominent attorney into the depth of alcoholism. His carefully crafted, self-made world collapsed around him. But with the support of his wife and family and church and A.A., he is back on his feet and now living a very different and much richer life – richer in the things which matter most. He told his pastor that he had discovered many surprises on his journey back – foremost of which was faith, real faith, living relationship with our loving God. He confessed that he had always felt a little above all that religious stuff, even though he was a regular church attender. He had always felt that while some people may really need it, he found it rather unnecessary for his life, even irrelevant to his daily life. But now, he said:

So many words I had heard all my life in church have suddenly, like a flash of blinding light, become real to me. Words that I’ve heard all my life are suddenly, amazingly real, deep, blindingly true.
Like being “born again.” Or like “you can only find your life by losing it.” Or like “Take up your cross daily and follow me.” Through my pain, my hitting bottom, I’ve met God. 
God is a tough, relentless, devastating friend.  

I really like that last line – “God is a tough, relentless, devastating friend.” Both the Gerasene demoniac and the Gerasene crowd would have agreed with that statement. “Tough, relentless, devastating” – yes, indeed. Because when we let the power of Jesus loose in our lives, things are going to change whether we like it or not. But also, “Friend” – because that tough, relentless, devastating transforming power of Jesus has only one goal, one purpose, one direction. Which is the healing of our souls. The rebirth of our hearts and minds. The entrance into a new life abundant and good – a life worth living, a life rich in prayer and meaning, a life centered around what matters most.

So, which shall it be? That Gerasene crowd keeping Jesus at arm’s length, lest His power reach out to them and change them? Admirers of Jesus, but only at arm’s length? Or that now-healed man begging that he might be near to Jesus always – a disciple of Jesus – in order that Jesus’s power should continue to change him, to heal him, to make him holy and to make him whole?

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1 Mark 4:35-41.
2 See, for example, Matthew 6:19-24; 19:16-30.