



## **Plundering Satan's House: Mark 5:1-20**

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But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house. (Mark 1:27)

Some Bible stories grow on you. The story of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac is one. I never heard it read in church. That's probably because there are all sorts of uncomfortable things about the story—unclean spirits who talk, drowned pigs, and people who respond to miracles by asking Jesus to leave. Some hearers, however, are not easily put off. Young people whose world is shaped by movies in which evil is not domesticated by physiological or psychological theories are fascinated by the story. For one thing, it permits them to ask about things like the devil and evil spirits that are excluded from the polite speech of mainline churches. And the story may convince them that the Gospels are more interesting than they have been led to imagine. That's reason enough to tell it.

Without explanation, Jesus set out with his little band of followers across the lake. He had just finished a successful teaching engagement along the shore. There was no good reason to make the trip and every reason to stay away. The land of the Gerasenes was off limits, out of bounds: For a Jew, everything about it was

unclean—a cemetery, pigs, Gentiles, and most of all the menacing presence of a wild man with an unclean spirit. No decent Jew would set foot on such soil. Besides, no Jew would have been welcome. Jesus, however, intruded, as was his custom.

People usually flocked to Jesus for help. Not this time. The man who came out of the tombs to meet him had no interest in a cure. In fact, he didn't come of his own accord at all. Something had taken possession of him. It wasn't hard for his neighbors to see. He was completely unruly, and while he had hurt only himself—he abused his body, cutting and piercing it with all sorts of things until he bled—he was clearly a risk to others. The most frightening thing was that he couldn't be restrained. He had the strength of an army. He tore off straitjackets like playthings. He ripped doors off their hinges. He even broke free of chains. The health care professionals were terrified—and powerless. They had offered their diagnoses: an unknown virus, a chemical imbalance, a severe bi-polar disorder. But they couldn't do anything to help him, and most people weren't convinced. "He's possessed," they whispered. "He's been taken over by an unclean spirit." They knew the professionals didn't like that sort of talk. But to look into the man's eyes and to listen to his blood-curdling moans made it difficult to believe anything else.

People were genuinely relieved when he escaped one last time and fled to the tombs

outside of town. At least he was out of sight, and they didn't have to lie awake at night listening to him moan. The dead would be more tolerant neighbors.

This was the man who came running to Jesus as he entered the part of town fit only for pigs, the dead, and those who had lost control of their lives.

The man with the unclean spirit ran to Jesus not to be cured but to protect himself. He knew a threat when he saw it: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" The disciples had just marveled at Jesus calming of the storm: "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" The demoniac knew. "Jesus, Son of the Most High God." He could see things others could not, and he knew that he—or rather the spirit—had reason to fear. A stronger one had come to plunder his house.

"I adjure you by God, do not torment me," he cried out. What irony! After what the spirit had put the poor man through, did it really hope for any kind of special treatment? And did it expect God to respond to such a power play in the presence of the Son of the Most High God? Perhaps the words were a sign of desperation.

"What is your name?" Jesus asked the demoniac. Names are important for healers. Naming the disease or the malady is an essential first step. For some, of course, the naming is like a death sentence when healers are powerless to do anything. "It's cancer," or "It's schizophrenia." Perhaps it felt like that to Jesus' disciples. "'Legion' is my name," shouted the spirit, "for we are many!" Little wonder the townspeople had such difficulty with their neighbor: he was inhabited by a whole army of spirits.

If giving the name was a boast, conjuring up images of the irresistible destructive power of occupation forces to frighten Jesus off, it didn't work. The one

who commanded the wind and the sea has power to cast out even an army of spirits—and once the Legion had given out his name, the tone changed. The spirits knew they had met a superior power and would soon be ousted from their habitation. And so, like a conquered army, they set out to negotiate a truce. "Do not send us out of the region," they requested. The reason was obvious: unclean spirits thrive among the tombs, in a region where pigs graze, in Gentile territory. "Send us into the pigs."

Surprisingly, Jesus gave in to their request. Usually he cast out demons with a word, but here he seemed willing to play. He gave permission for the army of spirits to enter the enormous herd of swine. Their new hosts proved only an unstable and temporary abode, however. The herd promptly headed for the water with their unclean hosts and ran headlong over the cliff into the sea—and everyone knows that water is the one thing unclean spirits cannot endure. (Remember Dorothy and the wicked witch?) Unclean pigs and unclean spirits end up where all unclean things should—in the water, where they can be cleansed. And the best part is that the Legion chose the means of their own destruction!

Some of the participants were not amused. The swineherds witnessed the impossible spectacle and ran off to tell their story. Who would believe them? People knew that pigs can't be stampeded and, when excited, will just run around in circles. But perhaps that would be enough to convince them that magic had to be involved.

The townspeople were not amused. They were unnerved. What impressed them most was the sight of the man clothed and in possession of himself—sitting with Jesus, quiet and

reasonable. That frightened them more than anything. They knew their capabilities, what they could cure and what they had to leave alone. They had long since come to terms with a world that was often beyond them—and if that meant leaving someone beyond help, like the demoniac, outside town, among the tombs, it seemed a small price to pay for the survival of the whole community. They compensated for their lack of power by protecting themselves against things they could not understand or control.

Jesus was a genuine threat to that world. He had done a good thing by helping a neighbor. But how was he able to do what was far beyond their control? Even imagining such power made them nervous. What was the source of such power? Witchcraft? Who would exercise control over him? What did he have in mind for their town? What protection did they have in the face of one who could command wind, sea, and a Legion of demons? “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Such raw power threatened all the barriers they had erected to protect themselves, all the compromises, all the structures that constituted the fragile thing we know as civilization. He was beyond all the standards by which they could measure, and they simply couldn’t afford to trust him.

And there was the cost. As impressive as the healing might be, the cost was too great: two thousand pigs! The owners were angry about their investment. The animal rights people were incensed. Who would pay? Someone would have to

pay! Showing mercy is never free. If Jesus were intent upon such deliverance, he would have to be prepared to pay what it cost.

So they asked Jesus to leave. Who wouldn’t? Perhaps it’s little wonder the liberated demoniac wanted to leave as well. He had been delivered only because Jesus, the stronger one, had intruded into a place where he was not invited—and not even welcome. He had been healed when he could not even ask for help. But his new situation was hardly ideal. People would be uncomfortable around him (they often are around those who have experienced an unexplainable healing or a conversion), and he could easily become the focus of resentment as people calculated the cost of his cure. A blind man whose sight Jesus restored discovered that seeing is not an unmixed blessing. People sometimes find it difficult to deal with things beyond their imagining, even good things, and would prefer to remain in the dark.

“Take me with you,” the man asked Jesus. But it was not to be. “Go home and tell,” Jesus commanded. And he did. And some from outside the Jewish family who later came to Jesus, hunting even for crumbs that might fall from the master’s table, may well have come because of his testimony.

Jesus went on to other villages, intruding into the lives of people who often did not know they were blind or in bondage, seizing control from the forces that blinded or bound them—until the authorities’ fear of his power came to outweigh the good that he accomplished. Like the townspeople and the rich man who later came to Jesus, the authorities had too much invested in the stability of their households to trust one who spoke with authority and not like the scribes, who calmed the seas and cast out the Legion. They would have to learn that the Son of the Most High God could be trusted—that he was willing to pay whatever it cost to cure what ailed them. They would have to discover, as did the man with the Legion, that there was no protecting themselves against the mercy of God.