

Nice is Not the Point: Change is Possible, Luke 8:26-39

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Do we have any pork producers here? Anyone here who raises hogs? That is ridiculous for me to ask, because I know that several of you have hogs as part of your farms. I don't know what you think when you hear this story of Jesus casting demons out of this man in the area of the Gerasenes across the sea of Galilee. Let me share with you what someone else thinks.

The Christian writer and teacher Marilyn McEntyre related a story where she was teaching the gospels, to a group of people not too familiar with the stories. One of her students protested "Those were innocent pigs! They belonged to some innocent pig farmer!" At least this one student was shocked by some of the things Jesus said and did. McEntyre then said she asked the Christians in the group how this Bible study had changed their understanding of Jesus. One student put their hand up and said "I don't know exactly how to put this, but this isn't the Jesus I grew up with. He doesn't seem very ... nice."

As she tells the story, Marilyn McEntyre said that she thought for a minute. In other words, she prayed for an appropriate response to what she believed was a moment of distress on the part of her student. Finally McEntyre told her student: "Nice is not the point. Nice isn't the same as holy. 'God is love' doesn't mean 'God is nice'." Sometimes God isn't nice at all – not by our standards.

McEntyre went on to say that as Christians, we might strive less for niceness and more for loving rightly. One of her husband's finer moments in parenting, she relates, came one day when after he had uttered an unwelcome word of correction to a disgruntled child, he leaned down, looked in his daughter's eye, and said "Honey, this is what love looks like." McEntyre goes on to say that love, in that case, must have seemed to her daughter a far cry from nice."

By our contemporary standards of what is nice, Jesus should have left this man to live as he was, not bothering him, letting the demons have their way with him.

Last week we had the story of Jesus visiting Simon the Pharisee and having his feet anointed by the woman while they were eating dinner. We heard in that story how we all need God's love and forgiveness. It does not matter if we are notorious like the woman in the story, or if we are an upright clean living citizen like Simon. Great forgiveness should create great gratitude, and a forgiving spirit and attitude in our own lives.

After Jesus left the home of Simon, he was teaching the crowds and told them the story of the person seeding grain. Some seed is eaten by birds, some is stepped on by people walking, some grows up and is choked out by weeds. Some of the seed falls into good soil and yields a great harvest. Jesus explained the story by saying the seed is the word of God. Where the word truly takes root in the hearts of people we will see the fruit of that faith in their lives.

After telling this story Jesus and the disciples got in a boat and went across the Sea of Galilee. A storm came up, the disciples were afraid. Jesus calmed the wind and the waves with a word of command from

his mouth. The disciples asked among themselves “Who then is this, that he commands even wind and water, and they obey him? “ Who is this that commands even the very forces of nature?

That is where our good news for today from Luke’s gospel picks up. The boat with Jesus and the disciples has landed on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, in the country of the Gerasenes. This area is primarily non-Jewish. It is pagan. While there were a few Jewish folks living there, they were definitely in the minority.

Because God chose the Jewish people, the children of Israel, to be a holy priesthood, they were to keep themselves holy. As the years went by what happened was that the Jewish people started looking down on non-Jewish folks as dirty, and unclean, not holy like us. Here comes Jesus, the one who commands even wind and water, walking right into the heart of unclean, unholy territory.

The first person Jesus meets is a man filled with demons. The demons tormented this man so much that he couldn’t even keep clothes on. He could not live in a house but was among the graves. In Jewish tradition touching the dead made a person unclean. Even touching a grave was considered dirty. Here is a man possessed by the forces of evil living among the unclean.

The disciples, who have been with Jesus, hearing Jesus teach and preach and heal people of their diseases, the disciples who just saw Jesus calm the wind and the waves, and they ask “Who is this?” They don’t seem to know who their teacher is. Here is an unclean man, living in an unclean place. He has evil spirits filling him, and they know who Jesus is. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God?”

This same Jesus who has power over the wind and the waves has authority over even the forces of evil. Jesus commanded the unclean spirits to come out of the man. The spirits tried to cut a deal with Jesus. They begged Jesus not to send them into the abyss, the place of eternal sorrow.

Instead, they begged to be allowed to enter the pigs. Jesus didn’t command them to enter the pigs. He did allow them to. Yes they did belong to some innocent pig farmer, and yes, they were innocent pigs. Maybe it wasn’t the nicest thing for Jesus to allow the herd to be destroyed as they went out of their minds with the demons and rushed into the water to drown.

But for the man Jesus freed, he did the holy and loving thing. He set him free and cleaned him up.

The herdsmen saw all this. They ran away and told everyone what happened. The people heard this story and came out to see Jesus, and the people were afraid. They asked Jesus and his disciples to leave. The man who was set free from the demons wanted to stay with Jesus. Jesus told him, return to your home and tell everyone how much God has done for you. The fear of the people kept them from the most wonderful opportunity of their lives, a relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus tells the now free man that what he, Jesus, has done is what God has done. The work of Jesus is the work of God. That was true then and it is true today. As Jesus leaves the area, it was important that the man work for Jesus in that region by telling what God has done. Jesus left, but he left a witness behind to tell others.

Maybe it wasn't nice, either, for Jesus to tell the man, you cannot come with me. Stay here, and tell what God has done. But that is what Jesus did because the work he came to do on this earth was more important than "being nice".

This is the time in which we live. Too many people in our society want Jesus to be "nice." Too many people want to just push Jesus away saying yes, Jesus was certainly a nice man, a good man, but so were many other people. Jesus was a nice teacher and showed us how to live if we want to live that way. But certainly he isn't the eternal Son of God and certainly doesn't have a claim on my life.

Folks, that is the attitude that the church is facing in the twenty-first century. People want Jesus the good shepherd who brings back the lost lamb into the fold. People don't want to think about Jesus while he was out there beating on a lion or a bear to rescue that lamb. We don't want to think about a Jesus who put his own life in peril and shed his own blood on a cross to rescue us. We don't want to think about a Jesus grabbing the devil by the throat and casting him into the abyss, the place of eternal sorrow. We don't want to think about a Jesus who takes unclean people and makes them clean.

Guess what, folks? We are cleaned and made free, and it is all because of everything Jesus has done. It is maybe not the happiest thing to admit to ourselves that the savior we have, Jesus Christ, we have because we need a savior. We could say, well, it is nice to have a savior. The truth is that it goes much deeper than that. We need a savior. Otherwise our eternal destiny would be the abyss. Instead, Jesus gives us an eternity of joy with him. It is true, that is our identity. We are sinners saved by God's grace alone.

It is also true Jesus goes into unclean places still today. The way that Jesus gets there is that his witnesses take him there. Wherever his witnesses go to tell about him, Jesus is right there with them by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So who are the most unclean people you can think of? Who are the people you don't want to have anything to do with? Who don't you want to hang out with? Is it people who drink a lot, alcoholics? Drug users? People in prisons? Unmarried parents? Homosexuals? People who use a lot of foul language? Who do you not like?

I will admit, I have been around people like that, and they aren't always pleasant to be around. Life would be a lot nicer if we didn't have to deal with people like that, wouldn't it?

Remember, nice is not the point. The point is love and holiness. Will we love other people enough to share Christ with them? Will we love them as Christ loved us? These people won't get to heaven unless they have Jesus as savior. How will they ever have Jesus as savior if no one tells them about Jesus? How will someone tell them if they don't love them?

Oh, we all know that is right. We also know that love is patient and kind and it takes more than just giving a tract to someone or telling them to repent or burn. It takes the time and energy to build a relationship of trust. It takes patience. It takes kindness to the point where they see your joy and want what you have.

Nice is easy. Love is hard.

The payoff is holiness. The transforming love of Christ turns people from the kind we don't want to have anything to do with, into the kind of people we like to be around.

This is the point in the service where we should have a testimony. I know alcoholics who the Lord got a hold of sobered them up and cleaned them up. I know homosexuals who have been set free and have left that lifestyle.

I know a former drug dealer who is now a gentle man of God, one of the most beautiful people you will ever meet. If you need a testimony, I can provide references. God takes unholy people and makes them holy, just like he did for us. God takes away our unholiness and gives us holiness.

What God did so long ago in the land of the Gerasenes, he is still doing today. It takes witnesses, it takes fellowship and accountability. It takes the followers of Jesus being willing to go to people and places that might not be very nice, and to love them and serve them. That is how Jesus comes into the broken and haunted places. Jesus is the light which shines in the darkness. Jesus is the Lord of heaven and earth, and he has come to find his people wherever they may have wandered or been taken. He has come to lead us home, where we may be clothed and in our right minds, sitting at his feet, enjoying his presence, living in his joy.

That is our good news for today. Let us pray...