



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Do You See What I See?

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 5:1-20

February 13, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Mark tells us that Jesus travels into Gentile territory. Given the fact that there were Gentiles in Mark's congregation, this is more than a casual statement. If you didn't know the Decapolis was Gentile territory, the fact that the story involves some pig farmers should be a good clue. Mark wants the Gentiles who are in his congregation and worshiping the Jewish Messiah, the Christ, to know that they are seen. They are included in this story of the gospel.

When Jesus arrives, it says that he is met by a man who has been pushed out from his community—probably because they fear him. This demoniac is like that old show, "The Incredible Hulk." They try to bind him and he breaks the chains. They can't control him. His strength frightens them, so they push him out to live among the tombs. The description is not subtle. This man is as good as dead. The demons control his life.

In Mark's gospel, there are a couple of things we need to know about demons. They often speak. And they always know who Jesus is. It's interesting because no one else knows who Jesus is, not really—but the demons do. They battle Jesus. And they persecute people.

Now, I don't know what a demon is. It's old-world language, for sure. But I know the realities that the ancients experienced that they attributed to demons: Mental illness. Sometimes physical ailments and conditions. Pain of the body or spirit. Sometimes blindness or the inability to hear. What the ancients knew and what we know, too, is that life is fragile and there are realities that challenge human flourishing. It's what Mark would describe as a wilderness. What Mark has already told us is that Jesus is cast into that wilderness to do battle with anything that

erodes human thriving. Fighting demons is just part of the work.

It says Jesus casts the demons out of the man and into a herd of swine, who rush down the hill and drown in the sea. Someone once told me this story doesn't make any sense because pigs can swim. I thought, "You just read this story and that's the part that confuses you?"

Well, the miracle is over, but the story is just getting started. This remarkable deed draws a crowd. This is what it says: "they saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid." They saw the man healed and it terrified them, to the point that they ask Jesus to leave their neighborhood. They are not only afraid of the demoniac, even though he is healed; they are afraid of Jesus.

But the man who had had the legion has a different reaction. 'Let me come with you,' he asks. From time to time, Jesus calls people to follow him. We read about the call of Levi just last week. But this is the first time Jesus gets a volunteer, and Jesus says, 'no, you can't come... you must stay and tell them what happened. Tell them how the Lord has had mercy on you.'

Mercy. If I understand the text, mercy is the point. And more specifically, the man must tell everyone about mercy because even though it was right in front of them, no one saw it. The whole town came out and they saw something, but they didn't see mercy. That means they didn't really see what Jesus had done.

The call came from the kitchen where my grandmother was preparing her world-class peach cobbler. She said, "Tom, stop that right now." I don't remember what I was doing, in part because the list of things I might have been doing that I shouldn't have

been doing was not a short list. What I remember is my bewilderment that my grandmother knew what I was doing because she was in another room.

If pressed, she would reveal her secret weapon. “I have eyes in the back of my head,” she would say. “I can see everything.” I believed her. She could even see through walls. No secrets with her. So, it was not a rare thing for me to hear from the other room, “Tom, stop that right now.” It was spooky. Jesus could see everything, too, and was constantly seeing things that everyone else missed.

This demoniac was scary. He was strong and intimidating. And everyone could see that. So, they bound him. They chained him. They pushed him out to live among the tombs. He was dead to them. That’s all they saw.

Jesus saw that, too, but somehow, as if he has eyes that see through walls, he looks through all of that craziness and sees a human being in there. And when you see the humanness in others, mercy is always possible.

But the problem is that it’s so much easier just to see everything that is wrong. It’s so much easier to see that which frightens us in others, that we sometimes fail to see the good, the human, the beautiful.

David Ford was a professor of divinity at Cambridge University. In his book, “The Shape of Living,” he tells of visiting the L’Arche community. It is a word that means ‘ark,’ as in Noah’s ark. It is an international community that provides a place of refuge for special-needs adults. Dr. Ford met a woman named Katherine who was a caregiver at L’Arche. David asked her where she finds the energy and the patience to provide care for them. She said with every person, we are “waiting for the beauty to appear.” It may take years, she said, and you may have to adjust your eyes to see different kinds of beauty, but it’s there.¹ Every day we are just waiting for the beauty to appear.

I think that is a Christian practice. To look for the beauty in one another. Because unless we can see the beautiful, the demons win.

My grandmother could tell when I was getting into mischief and she didn’t even need to be in the room. As a kid, it seemed kinda spooky, but I was

never afraid. Not really. Because I also knew that she saw me. And, in the ways that grandparents do, she loved what she saw.

Sometimes it may feel that we are never really seen, but Jesus was able to look through all the failure and brokenness in our lives and see us, or to use the biblical image, could see the image of God, the glimmer of God, in us. It’s what makes mercy possible. When we see the humanness in one another, mercy follows. Jesus always sees the beautiful in God’s world and in God’s children. Always.

Last month my special-needs brother, Gene, had his 60th birthday. He lives in Louisiana in a group home a bit like L’Arche. He can’t travel anymore so he has missed some family gatherings: Christmas, our daughter’s wedding, and the like. So, my siblings and I all gathered in Natchitoches, Louisiana for his 60th. Natchitoches is where they filmed the movie “Steel Magnolias,” if you have ever seen that. It’s also where my brother has called home since before that old movie was made.

Gene knew I wrote a little book last year and he asked me, “Brother, (or ‘Bwuddah’ as he says it) what’s the book about?” I said, “Well, Gene, it’s a church book.” He said “Oh.” I said, “But Gene, I do talk about you in the book.” He got quiet for a minute and then said, “My bwuddah. I can’t believe he wrote a book about me.”

Well, Gene, that’s right. We all got together and I took him a copy of the book and I found the pages where I mentioned him. We sat at the kitchen table of our AirB&B and I read the part about him from the book. He just beamed. In a strange way, it was the best part of his birthday. About an hour later, I found him back at that table with the book in his hands, turning the pages. He can’t read. Not even “Go Dog Go” but he can read his name. He was turning the pages looking for his name. My youngest brother Jim asked him, “Gene, did you find your name?” “Yes.” “Well, you should look for my name now.” Gene said, “Jimmy, the book is not about you; it’s about me!”

Now, I don’t know what was going on in that unusual mind of his, but I hope he was feeling seen. I hope he was trusting... I see you, bwuddah. I can look through all the stuff that stands between you and the

1 David Ford, *The Shape of Living* (1997) p. 125.

world and see the man that's trapped in there somewhere. And you are pretty beautiful.

Anyone can see the demons. But if that is all we see, then the demons win. But looking past all the demons to find a human being in there? That's holy.

I could talk about all the ways you are like Jesus in this story... of how you are so good at seeing the beauty in others. You see the good in our children and you keep the promises we make to them in baptism when you teach them in Lighthouse and volunteer for VBS.

You see the beauty in one another when you host a memorial reception, just being there for families when they need us the most.

You are good at seeing the human in our neighbors when they must admit they don't have it all

together and need a little help to feed their families or their kids need a bit of help with homework.

Just yesterday, you anticipated the beauty in strangers from a strange land as you set up an apartment for refugees from Afghanistan.

You are good at that. I could go on. I could talk to you about how you are like Jesus here but I also know that for all of us there are times when we are like the demoniac. We feel that the world doesn't quite see us but rather sees the failures, disappointment and brokenness in our lives. When that day comes, I want you to know the promise of this gospel is that God sees you. Whatever stuff may be cluttering your world, whatever may be covering up the glimmer of God in you, God sees through all of that and sees you. And like a grandmother, God loves what she sees.