



Do You See It?

TEXT
Psalm 8; Mark 5:1–20

November 6, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Before you leave today, I will remind you that we are welcomed into this place by the love of God. That same holy love will also send us out into God's beloved world that is broken, but also beautiful.

God's world is beautiful, and we see the beauty all around us. I receive very little joy from raking leaves, but I do love the beauty they provide as they turn brilliant with color. I love seeing sunsets as well as watching rivers run. I love how clearly we see Orion's belt on a clear night and how Venus and Saturn hang in the southern sky. I've been awed by the colors of the Grand Canyon or the colors of the Caribbean ocean life, or the music of the morning birds, or the quiet of Quetico¹ at sunrise.

God's world is beautiful, and seeing it is a spiritual experience for me. I join the singer who declares, *When I look at the stars, the work of your fingers ... it is so beautiful, so majestic, so awe-inspiring ... what am I?* The beauty of God's work is all around us all the time. God's beloved world is beautiful. Seeing that is a spiritual experience for me. But

that's not the kind of beauty I am thinking about today. I am thinking about beauty that you must search for. I am thinking about the kind of beauty that can be missed, that is often overlooked. In this, I am not talking about a spiritual experience, but a spiritual discipline.

In John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Owen is a small, brilliant young boy with a strange voice, an unusual confidence and a faith so strong that were he to pray for rain, you might want to carry an umbrella.

Owen and his best friend Johnny Wheelwright played a game together. They called it "the shot." John would pass a basketball to Owen, Owen would run to him, John would lift him up high, and he would dunk the ball into the basketball hoop. Owen was very competitive and disciplined about this. He wanted to do it as fast as he could. Owen Meany would never play basketball, but he wanted to perfect this shot. So they timed themselves: eight seconds, six seconds. At one point, he had done so in under four seconds.

Owen said, "Set the clock to three seconds. If we can do it in under four seconds, we can

do it in under three seconds. It just takes a little more faith," Owen said.

"It takes practice," [John] told him.

"Faith takes practice," Owen said.²

He's right about that. Faith takes practice. Sometimes seeing the beautiful in this world requires practice.

There is a strange moment in Jesus' ministry as he comes to the region of the Gerasenes. Jesus steps out of a boat and is met by a man possessed by a legion of demons. *Legion* is a military term which means "a group of soldiers numbering 3,000 or more." This man is possessed by a legion of demons. He is pushed out of town because the town is afraid of him. He was strong — so strong that when they chained him, he broke their chains.

Alone and outcast, he lived in the cemetery. It's Mark's way of telling us that he is already as good as dead. But Jesus heals him. I can't tell you any more than that. He casts the legion of demons into a herd of pigs, something any Jewish reader would find comical. When the village comes to see what has happened, they see the man who has had the de-

mons “clothed and in his right mind ... and they were afraid.” They asked Jesus to leave.

The man who was healed, on the other hand, wants to follow Jesus. Jesus has a practice of asking people to follow him: *Come and follow me*. But this is the first time someone volunteers, but Jesus sends him away. *No, you have to stay. You have to return to your friends and tell them what happened.*

So why does this man have to return and tell them what happened? They already know what happened, don't they? They saw him clothed and in his right mind. They already know what happened, right? Maybe not. They actually didn't see what really happened here.

This is what I mean. They saw the demons. They saw a man that they feared. They saw a problem. What they never saw was a human being. Even after he is healed, they still don't see him. That's the difference between the crowds and Jesus. Amidst the demons, Jesus looks beyond all of that and sees a human being. That takes practice.

David Ford is 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 a community for the mentally handicapped. It is a place where they live and experience relationship. A woman named Katherine is a caregiver at L'Arche. David spoke with her about how she

finds the energy to provide this care. 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.”³

We need that spiritual discipline. Why am I talking about this? Because unless we can see the beautiful, the human in each other, the demons win.

Jesus always sees the beautiful in God's world and in God's children — always.

So one of the things we do when we read scripture is we ask ourselves, where do we find ourselves in this story? For some of us, we might be the man captured by demons. We might be a person who needs someone to see the humanness in us.

I think about children who are bullied at school. Every day they enter school hallways and bathrooms and playgrounds and cafeterias where they are barraged by words that make them feel small or unintelligent or lesser in some fashion. They are excluded from community.

Estimates are that nationally over three million teenagers experienced a significant depressive episode in the past year, a number that has almost doubled in the past five years.⁴ So they cut themselves, or hide in a bottle of cheap beer, or in their parents' liquor cabinet, or in a myriad of other ways. And their demons are posted on social media so that they can never get away from their worst moments.

They need the church. Here children and youth are defined not by the words others tattoo them with, but by the promise of their baptism: “You are a child of God, and there is no power that can change that.” For someone to see the beautiful, the value in them, is no less dramatic than casting out a legion of demons in their lives.

Some of us may be like the demoniac in this story and just need someone to see us. For others of us, we may need to be like Jesus, who sees the beauty in another. I think this is a constant struggle.

I wonder if all of us might need to practice seeing the beautiful in this nation. By late Tuesday, this nation will have elected a new president and new state officials. As much talk as there has been about campaigns being about ideas and issues, too much of it has been about character and culture. Much of it has been a language of civic fundamentalism. Candidates, and many who support them, embrace certain positions even when the facts are to the contrary. We are told that Washington or government or those who participate in government are so broken — so fundamentally broken — that it makes you wonder if they see the solution is to have no government at all.

And it has been a mean-spirited season — not just combative, but mean-spirited. This is harmful to us as a nation. If our leaders can't see the beautiful in us as a nation, they can't

heal us. Healing comes from seeing through all the demons that there is humanity down in there. We need that practice.

It's one reason we need the church — because at least in here we know that we are called to look for the beautiful, to look for the good.

Several weeks ago, we met in the Chapel to celebrate the life of Helen Hogan and, with prayers and the practice of faith, hand her to the angels. For those of you who did not know Helen, she was for 40 years the assistant organist for Village Church. She played for morning worship. She played for weddings and memorial services.

When I came several years ago, Helen was accompanying our children's choirs. She loved that. I remember a Christmas Eve 5:00 children and family service. If you haven't been to that service, it is about as calm as a state fair. She walked over to me during the service. We were behind the display of Bethlehem, and she said, "Do you see those children?"

"Well yes, I see them." They were playing shepherds and wise men.

"Do you see this sanctuary?" she said. "Just look at those people."

"Yes, I see them," I said.

"Isn't this just great? Isn't this just beautiful?"

Helen Hogan delighted in this church. She delighted in your mission and in your music. She delighted in the way you cared for each other and the thoughtfulness you bring to faith. She delighted in Village.

"Isn't this great?" she said. She had the spiritual discipline to see beauty even in the most ordinary of moments among us.

I am practicing seeing the beautiful, and it is all around.

It's beautiful when you give third-grade kids a Bible to read.

It's beautiful when you come on a Thursday night and spend hours getting an anthem ready to help God's people worship.

It's beautiful when you take time Saturday afternoon to prepare a Kids' Kingdom lesson for children to learn again that they are loved by God — or ride to the Faxon Elementary School to meet Jason or Monique and read a book and build some confidence.

It's beautiful that you provide a pastoral counselor so that people can bring their heaviest burdens and try to leave them here.

It's beautiful that you bring peanut butter because we live in the wealthiest country in history, so no one, not anyone, should be hungry — especially our children.

It's beautiful that you give a Saturday to volunteer at the health clinic, or a Tuesday to volunteer in mission sewing, or a Thursday in the food pantry, or a spring break in the Dominican Republic, or a Monday to serve on the Session, or a Tuesday morning to study scripture with some buddies, or ...

But mostly, it is beautiful when you practice the holy art of seeing the beautiful in one another. There is not enough of that in this world.

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

¹Quetico is a national park in Canada which consists of hundreds of lakes. Each summer I spend some time canoe camping there. It is one of my favorite places.

²John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989), p. 347

³David Ford, *The Shape of Living* (1997), p. 125

⁴*Time*, November 7, 2016, "The Kids Are Not All Right"

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.