

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 8:22-56

*"Got Faith?"*

Jesus' travels for a brief period take him out of Galilee into Gentile territory on "the other side" of the Lake. The journey across the water, and the people he encounters there and on his return to Galilee are graphic illustrations of the question that was posed by his parable of "The Sower" - when the word of God comes to you (in the person and words of Jesus), do you respond with faith, and is that faith real enough to endure the testing brought by troubles and by the pressures of life? Four tightly woven stories tell us much about the faith of the people involved.

### 1) *Across the Lake*

The first group of people tested are the Twelve, who are in the boat with Jesus sailing across Lake Galilee. A storm blows up - downwinds from the hills to the east (what we now call the Golan Heights) whip up dangerous squalls and very choppy water. The men - several of them experienced fishermen - are scared, and sense they are in real danger of being swamped. But Jesus sleeps through it all! When they wake him in alarm, he immediately "rebukes the wind and raging waters" and the Lake becomes calm.

The men are of course anything but calm; in fear and amazement they realize that this man they have been following not only heals people, but even commands wind and wave

to obey him. "Who is this?" is all they can say! But Jesus has a rebuke for them: "Where is your faith?" Not so much "why don't you have faith in me?" as "where is your faith when you need it?"

They reach the other side safely, but are immediately confronted by a maniac. This man is possessed; he has broken all the bonds of society, cannot even be restrained physically, and lives half-naked in the caves - places used by the townspeople to bury their dead. Even half-observant Jews from Galilee suddenly know "they are not in Galilee any more!" A crazy man possessed by "an unclean spirit" is lurking among the tombs in Gentile territory, where herds of pigs roam; this is about as "unclean" a situation as the Twelve will find themselves in! Why are they here? Why did Jesus want to come here? How will he deal with this man?

Jesus of course has deep compassion for this bedeviled man, and rebukes the spirit that possesses him. The demon, or the man, or whoever is speaking, confronts Jesus but also pleads for his mercy. Multiple entities control this man, calling themselves Legion as though they were an army battalion, and Jesus aptly casts them out of the man and into a herd of pigs who quickly self-destruct. A fitting place for demons, the Twelve no doubt thought!

But the man is transformed by Jesus. Someone who was demonic, deranged, isolated, half-naked, dangerous, is soon found sitting at Jesus' feet as his disciple, calm, *"clothed and in his right mind."* His transformation is so profound that it scares the villagers who have come out to see what happened to their pigs! Clearly the man who did this - this Galilean - is more dangerous than the demoniac! They ask Jesus to leave. The healed and restored man would gladly go with him, but instead the man from the tombs is sent home to his village to testify to the healing power of God that is in Jesus.

## 2) *And Back Again*

No doubt the Twelve were glad to get back to Galilee! Crowds greet Jesus on his return, and of course bring their needs with them. Two people require immediate attention. I'm sure you remember their stories.

One is as respectable as the demoniac was scary. A local synagogue elder named Jairus has a sick daughter. She is twelve years old, on the edge of adolescence, betrothal and marriage. But all that bright future is dimmed because she is seriously ill. A father's heart is touched, and Jairus seeks Jesus out and pleads with him for help - he even falls on his knees and begs. Jesus of course set out towards Jairus' house, but the crowds that now gather around Jesus make progress difficult. In fact crowds of curious and needy people are emerging as a handicap to Jesus' work - perhaps even a "test of faith" that threatens to "choke" his ministry?

As I'm sure you remember, Jesus is further delayed on his way to Jairus' house by a woman in the crowd. We don't know her name, but we do know she represents a polar opposite to Jairus. She has been bleeding for twelve years - as long as Jairus' lovely daughter has lived - and she is anything but

beautiful in the eyes of the community: "unclean" because of her constant bleeding (almost certainly uterine); poor because she had spent all her money on physicians; isolated, shunned, probably widowed or divorced. A sad case, but one that nobody in town wants to touch.

But she is determined to touch Jesus. She creeps through the crowd, and manages to grasp the hem of his cloak. To her horror, Jesus stops and demands *"who touched me?"* The Twelve think he is crazy to even ask the question in such a crowd, but Jesus knows better. And so the poor woman comes trembling towards him and falls at his feet, knowing that her moment of testing has come. She explains, before all the people, why she touched Jesus, and how she knew instantly that she was healed. And Jesus, to her amazement and that of Jairus and the Twelve and everyone in hearing distance, calls her "daughter" and pronounces that *"her faith has healed her!"*

But what about Jairus' daughter? Messengers arrive to say it is too late, the girl has died! What did Jairus think at that moment? "That woman!" Here is his test of faith! Jesus sees a father's faith about to be choked, and says *"Don't be afraid; only believe."* He goes on to the house, turns out the wailing mourners, says of the daughter *"She is only sleeping,"* and is greeted with derision. And in another venture into "the unclean" (as if the bleeding woman wasn't enough!) Jesus takes the hand of a corpse and says *"My child, get up."* Her spirit returns, she rises, her parents are astonished. *"Give her something to eat... and don't tell anyone what happened"* - the crowds are becoming a problem, and they don't need any more encouragement!

### 3) Got Faith?

Wonderful stories! Why are they here in Jesus' ministry and Luke's narrative? Surely to teach us and all readers some basic truths.

First, that God in and through Jesus has power over nature, over demons, over disease and over death. We, like every other generation who have read these stories, need to know these things. We pray weekly in church (and probably daily at home) for God to heal people we love. We should, and he can. Jesus did not heal everyone he met, and does not today. But you and I know that when someone we love is in trouble medically, we turn instinctively and even desperately to prayer, and that's altogether right.

How and when and by what means and whom God heals are of course beyond our control, and often beyond our understanding. But to know that God can and does heal, and that he has decreed that his will and his work and his world operate at least in part on prayer ought to mean that we never stop praying for people we love when they are sick in body or mind or in any other way.

And that ought to be especially true for those "hard cases" - people we could easily call "possessed" - the ones with serious psychological problems or addictions or mental illnesses or dementias. No, I do not think these are caused by "evil spirits" - but nor do I think we should fall into either of two traps: believing that demons don't exist and that all the effects ascribed to them through history are only descriptions of mental illnesses; or at the other extreme, thinking that every physical or mental ailment we encounter is demonic.

Somewhere between, we need as much sense and spiritual discernment as Luke, and Jesus,

had - neither of them were fools! - to see some ailments as diseases, and others as representing a power that takes over some people's lives. If you have dealt with addicts, you know that at times you feel that you are confronting "something" that is stronger than you or the addicted person. And in those situations we all need to relearn faith and prayer, and to believe that God in Jesus can deal with things that are beyond our power.

And we need to know God is stronger than death. "Falling asleep" was a 1<sup>st</sup> century euphemism for dying, but Jesus knew, and the Christians slowly learned, that this held a deep truth - that people can "awake" from death; and that one day those who put their trust in God will be raised even as Jesus was. We will know one another, we will meet our loved ones, we will be "forever with the Lord." If we don't learn that truth, our faith will never survive bereavement, or the prospect of our own deaths.

Secondly, we are surely to learn that Jesus reached out then, and still does, to all kinds of people. Demoniacs, rejected women, respectable religious leaders, loving fathers, scared fishermen - Jesus looks only for people who trust him and have faith. Whoever we are, we can be his friends, his followers, his loved ones, his saved and delivered ones; no credentials needed, no prior achievements, no level of respectable living, only faith!

Thirdly, we learn that faith can take strange forms. Do not make a formula of it, or try to put it in a box. The Twelve were Jesus' closest disciples, had spent most time with him, but in a moment of trouble they panicked: their faith was submerged before their boat was. Even people who are in the inner circle of disciples sometimes show little faith - they may *have* faith, but they don't

*show* it! It's precisely when times are tough that faith has to be shown.

Other people live as "far out" of normal society as the demoniac in the caves, but a true encounter with Jesus can make them calm, "dressed, and in their right minds." If you or someone you love lives there, you need to know that anyone can come to Jesus' feet and find restoration and wholeness; that their faith is shown in their coming. Some women, and some men, sense that they are so "unclean" that they live on the fringes of society; but we all need to know that even an almost superstitious faith can be one that Jesus recognizes as genuine. Not all faith shows itself as politely and appropriately as a synagogue elder's would.

All these restored people had in common that in times of testing and of need they sought Jesus, and their instinct was that he could help them. In other words, they had faith in him. Their healings point us to the spiritual healing and restoration that is possible for anyone who will "not be afraid, but only believe." What Jesus looks for is faith that shows itself in troubled times, and by that reveals that it is genuine and deeply rooted.

Let us pray...