

Luke 8:26-39  
St Mark – June 19, 2022  
The Second Sunday after Pentecost  
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## Harmful Fear

Do not be afraid.

I don't know how often Jesus says these words, but he says them a lot.

We find so much to be afraid of in this life and most of our fears center in some way around pain and loss, but Jesus tells us over and over, "do not be afraid." I believe the fear he speaks of isn't the helpful kind of fear.

When we see a car coming fast right at us, in our lane of traffic, that fear is helpful. It causes us to slow down and be alert, to take action.

Living in fear is different. When fear stops us from trying new things or causes us to hang onto old, destructive habits it becomes a weight that burdens our soul. Jesus tells us to let go of past hurts, to venture out and allow the mystery of God, The Father, God, The Son, and God, the Holy Spirit to work in us.

Jesus reminds us that he is with us always. That we are loved and cared for more deeply than we can even imagine. He tells us that troubles and pains of this world are fleeting. That even when they seem to engulf us they will not hold us in their grip forever.

He assures us that there are no tears in heaven, that the Peace of God, the Love of God is what will engulf us in life eternal.

In our reading this morning we hear,

"Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear."

How startling!

The people of Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them. Can you imagine? They didn't want this man who had power over evil to stay with them. Their fear pushed God away.

How often do people do that? How often do those around us do that? How often do we push God away by clinging to our fear, by holding onto what has become comfortable, even if it hurts us, in our lives?

The people of Gerasenes had found a way to live with the discomfort of this man who lived in the tombs; this man who was always naked. They had become use to this man being kept under guard and bound with chains and

shackles. They expected that he would escape and go back to the tombs that had become his home. This man had become a fixture in their community and they found a way to live around him. They had learned to avoid him and stay as far away from him as they possibly could. Almost as if he didn't really exist at all.

When Jesus freed the man of the legion of demons he forced the community to once again see him as a man. Not an insane, possessed man, but as a person, much like themselves.

Now the people of Gerasenes had a new set of challenges.

Those who owned the swine suffered a severe financial loss. Would others in the community experience the same if this Jesus stayed? This man who was now wearing clothes and behaving as he had before the demons overtook him would return to daily life in their community. No longer living on the edges as an outcast. We can imagine that his family might well have replaced him. His wife remarried. His children now fathered by another.

Whatever the specific challenges, things for the people of Gerasenes had changed in substantial ways by this one act of Jesus and most of us are very uncomfortable with substantial change.

The people of Gerasenes focused on the difficulties and fear brought about by Jesus' miraculous gift instead of seeing the great joy and promise he brought. In so doing, they shut their door to life eternal.

Like the people of Gerasenes, we easily grow "use to" things as they are. We fear the unknown and hold onto our lives as they are, even with all the trouble our lives sometimes hold. How often have we heard or maybe even said, "The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know"?

The life Jesus offers is the invitation to radically change our lives. To turn away from fear and accept the goodness of God.

The people of Gerasenes rejected the opportunity Jesus offered. They let fear and the familiar win out.

Fortunately for us, not all of the people of that day turned Jesus away when they were afraid. Matthew and Mark tell the story of Jesus walking on water and calming the storm-tossed sea. When the disciples were afraid they turned away from their fear and trusted Jesus.

When we put our fear aside and trust Jesus we set our minds on good. We set our minds on the power of our creator. We make it possible for our souls to rest in the assurance that we are children of the most powerful God of Love. We are not slaves of Satan.

Jesus didn't force himself on the people of Gerasenes. When they asked him to leave them because they were terrified, he did. When they asked him to leave, the man he had just freed from the demons that possessed him for so long wanted to follow Jesus, but Jesus wasn't giving up on those who rejected him. Just as he never gives up on us when we stumble and take the wrong path.

Instead of Jesus allowing the man to become one of his followers,

“Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”

Jesus used this man who had received the gift that changed his life. He used him to make the power of God obvious to those around him.

Jesus does not give up on us when we reject him. He continues to be present in our lives in whatever ways will get our attention. You may be able to think of a time when you rejected Jesus. Maybe for only a few minutes or maybe for several years. If you think long enough, you might be able to remember ways that the promise of Jesus' love kept coming up in unexpected ways. That the promise of Jesus' love brought you back into his flock. That the promise of Jesus' love turned you into The Prodigal Son.

Those who choose God and trust in the goodness and power of God inspire me. They feed and strengthen my soul. These are the people who trust in God above all. One of those is a dear friend of mine. Her name is Florence and she lives in Kenya.

I've never met Florence face-to-face. I haven't even seen a picture of her.

Florence is the aunt of Julius Munyao Fumdi, a child Glenn and I sponsor through ChildFund. Julius turned seven a few months ago and he has been a part of our lives for more than two years.

Florence and I correspond about Julius and over time our conversations have broadened as we share our lives with one another.

Not too long ago Florence mentioned that her daughter had recently died and her granddaughter, Abigail was now living with her along with Julius and Monica (another family member's child). I asked Florence how her daughter had died and apologized if the question was too personal. This is how Florence responded,

“Since you come to our lives we become friends, so always feel free to ask any question without fear. What caused the death of my daughter was

pneumonia. She was treated in various hospitals but at long last she was promoted to glory. As the word of God indicates to us that everything happens for a reason. We accepted the will of God. Hoping that one day we shall meet on that beautiful shore. She left behind one beautiful daughter by name Abigail Mwendu hoping she will grow healthy and strong.”

It is clear to me that there are many challenges for Florence in her day-to-day life. Challenges that include food and water, illness and death. It is also very clear that she chooses to turn away from the fear those challenges bring. It is clear that she lives in the promise of the Resurrection.

May we, too, turn away from our worries and fears. I pray that we will offer them up to God. That we will acknowledge their significance. That we will know that they are fleeting.

I pray that we will accept the radical changes The Holy Spirit encourages in our lives.

I pray that we will see the hand of God in ourselves and in our Christian sisters and brothers.

I pray that we will never ask Jesus to leave us.