

“What Has Jesus Done for You?”

June 22, 2025

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Pentecost 2

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. The paraments on the altar and the pulpit have changed to green, indicating that we have entered the longest season of the church year, known as “time after Pentecost.” Our Scripture stories in this season focus on Jesus’ acts of ministry and mercy, beginning today with the healing of the Gerasene man who is possessed by demons. By this point in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee and shown the crowds that he is God. He now ventures into Gentile territory.

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus heals only one person and the rest of the community reacts with fear. They reject God’s saving power and ask Jesus to take his business elsewhere. But all it takes is for one person to declare the mighty works of God, and soon other communities will hear of Jesus’ healing power.

This gospel is a difficult lesson to read. My heart breaks for the possessed man. His suffering is real. And no one is willing to enter into this man’s suffering, so he is utterly alone. His condition has made him ritually unclean and he has been cast out of society. He must live in the tombs, among the dead, because the living are too afraid of him. His condition is so desperate that he has lost his own identity. I’m sure everyone in town knows him by his outrageous behavior or his screaming and crying, or by his inability to care for himself. But no one even remembers his name. No one wants to be associated with him. No one remembers which family clan he was a part of. In a communal society such as his, his very identity would have been tied up in his blood relations. But this man’s condition has rendered him homeless and virtually non-existent.

Then along comes Jesus. *Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?”* I find this scene so touching because the man defines himself by his pain and his struggles, and all of those things that hold him captive. He replies, “Legion,” because he has lost all control and given himself over to his captors. He feels he no longer has a name. He is unable to be who God has called him to be and he believes that his weakness has defined him. You may have experienced this phenomenon. Maybe you know someone whose disease or situation is so all-encompassing that they begin to lose who they once were.

This is especially difficult when people suffer from illnesses and conditions that, on the surface, seem to have no physical cause. And yet, their suffering is very real. I had an aunt who was known as the “lady who walks around town.” She barricaded herself in her house and refused any contact with anyone, including family and neighbors. Her house became an eyesore and unmanageable. We had her hospitalized one time against her will, but she signed herself out after three days, which she was able to do by law. After several years of this isolating existence, she died from neglect, meaning she did not take care of herself and she never let anyone help her. I guess that’s why this story touches me so deeply. I feel for anyone who has to face this situation in their own family.

But the good news in all this suffering is that Jesus shows up on the scene and is not rattled. He asks the man his name. He treats him like a real human being, and is not afraid to see the man as

he really is. He treats the man with compassion and dignity, not rejection. Jesus shows the man that he has sovereignty over the powers that destroy human life. He gives the man real hope.

So why does the crowd reject Jesus and ask him to leave? It says in the gospel that they are afraid. The man gave his name as “Legion,” which in Jesus’ time meant a regiment of 6,000 Roman soldiers. Maybe they were afraid that 6,000 demons could be living in the man. Maybe they thought that the demons would spill out onto them. Maybe they didn’t want their own demons to be exposed in front of Jesus. Perhaps the people were afraid that this man could have more power and authority than 6,000 demons or even 6,000 soldiers.

But this will not be the only time that Jesus and his message are rejected. We know that. Even God is rejected in our first reading from Isaiah. God stands there, ready to be found, and calls, “Here I am, here I am.” But God is rejected by the people. So God becomes sad and even angry. But by the end of the reading, God finally declares that descendants will come forth from Jacob and they will receive God’s holy inheritance. God promises to give this blessing for the servants’ sake. For the people’s sake. God will have mercy, and give blessing, even though God was rejected by the people.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus is willing to go to the places that are unclean and to speak with a person who is unclean and to acknowledge him as a human being. Jesus is willing to meet the man where he is and in the condition that he is in, because Jesus sees this man as a child of God. This is true of everyone Jesus encounters, whether in Scripture or with us today; Jesus is not afraid to see us for who we are and to love us for who we are. Jesus gives this man a new identity in his healing: child of God, worthy of mercy and love. Just like you and me.

We know that our world is a broken world. We know that our lives are imperfect and we are captive to forces that are beyond our control. We struggle with diseases and ailments, and we beat ourselves up for thinking that our weaknesses define us. This is a part of our human condition. We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves, and it is frustrating. And it is disappointing.

But even the darkest parts of our lives do not need to be what defines us. We are **all** children of the same heavenly Father and we **all** deserve mercy, forgiveness, healing and love. We believe in the crucified God, the suffering servant who gave his life in our place so that we might find hope in our suffering and healing in our situations. And our God promises to stay by our side, no matter what. Do you agree? If you do, take Jesus’ words to heart. ...*declare how much God has done for you.* Declare it out loud. Share your story of healing with others and share how Jesus has come into your life and given you meaning and redemption. Your words have great power. I promise that every time you share your story, you give others hope. I also guarantee that your neighbor needs to hear your good news, just as much as you need to share it. **Amen.**