

Set Apart

First UMC of Pocatello
October 31, 2021 – All Saints' Sunday

Mark 5:1-20

After the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, a long-awaited era of ecumenical dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian groups began. Many ancient Christian practices and traditions that had been hastily cast off during the Protestant Reformation began to re-enter the Protestant mainstream. They included practices of contemplative prayer and *lectio divina*; the idea of living communally according to a rule of life; spiritual pilgrimage, retreat, and direction; adherence to the Christian Calendar; and renewed attention to the saints. Purged of the temptation toward works righteousness by our belief in justification by faith alone, many of us now happily experience these practices as means of grace, which was John Wesley's label for anything that helps create an inner or outer posture for growing attentive to the movements of the Spirit.

When it comes to the idea of the saints, we Protestants usually don't go so far as to pray in the name of the saints, asking them to intercede to God on our behalf. Nor do we have a rigorous process for electing folks into formal sainthood. Always anchored to our belief in the priesthood of all believers – the conviction that any of us at any time might, by grace, become a mediator of God's love and healing presence to others – we tend to talk as if *every* member of the Christian community is one of the saints. And there's some firm biblical ground for doing that. Throughout his New Testament letters, Paul refers to those in the churches generally as “the saints” (c.f. Rom 1:7; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph. 1:1).

However, in flattening the designation of “saint” onto every follower of Jesus and leaving it at that, I think we risk losing two things. The first is a robust sense of sanctification, which was so central to John Wesley's vision of Christian life. Sanctification is the belief that we can, by grace, mature in our faith, hope, and love, and experience the transformation of our lives into the image of Christ, our minds into the mind of Christ. The second thing we risk missing is the psychological power of moral influence. Human beings are moved at deeply emotional levels by the radical living and loving of their fellows. Remarkable lives challenge us and motivate us toward personal change.

I think it's good to look at the idea of saints as with bifocals – there's the long-range, big-picture view in which we are all saints by virtue of our participation in the life of Jesus; and there's the close up, focused view on individual lives, some of which are particularly transparent to the love of God. What I'd like to explore today is that close-up view. What makes for a compelling, world-changing life of Christ-like love?

In both of the biblical languages, Greek and Hebrew, the word for “saint” is the exact same word as “holy.” For my grammar nerds, the words are adjectives that can be used substantively. “Holy” becomes “holy one.” So, according to the Bible, to be a saint is to be holy – consecrated, set apart, pure.

I find that the phrase “set apart” is the most helpful when considering the saints. Like the Levites, set apart within the tribes of Israel to preside over sacrifices and worship; like ordained persons in the churches, set apart within the broader community to dedicate their time and energy to shepherding the flock, the saints are not perfect people, but they *are* people who, by their simplicity of faith, commitment to the truth, and practice of unconditional love are living signs of all that God has called us to be.

This “set apart” nature of holiness and sainthood brings me to the Gerasene Demoniac.

He, too, was set apart, but not as a saint. He, too, was a sign, but not of grace. “He lived among the tombs,” set apart from his fellows, chained and shackled but to no avail, “always howling and bruising himself with stones” (Mk. 5:3, 5). Personal sabotage and societal failure kept him at a distance. He was a sign of all that is depraved and hopeless about the human condition. He was set apart as one beyond saving, beyond help. Oh, the people had tried. They had tried to heal him, then they had tried to restrain him. But they had long ago thrown up their hands. “No one had the strength to subdue him” (Mk. 5:4).

In our own time and place, when *we* consider such people, how many of us have thrown up *our* hands and said, “We have not the strength! There is no other option! If the demoniac can’t be helped, he must be subdued, and if he can’t be subdued, he must be banished.”

What shock when, out of nowhere, Jesus’ boat scrapes onto the beach, and he emerges to receive the man, and save him. Jesus heals him. Jesus does what the man’s community did not have the vision or energy or resources to do. Jesus learns the name of the affliction, banishes the demon, and restores the man to his “right mind” (Mk. 5:15). This man, set apart as the far outlier of the human family, now comes to the very center of the new family taking shape around Jesus. He sits at Jesus’ feet.

At the end of the story, the former demoniac is set apart in a redemptive way: He is sent as a preacher of the good news, as a witness and a storyteller: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you” (Mk. 5:20)! This man became the first missionary to the Gentiles, of whom you and I are a part. This man was among the first to bring us the good news of God’s mercy. He is one of the churches first saints.

Oh, how many potential saints are there in our world today who are chained up on the outskirts of town, haunting the tombs, hauling about their battered bodies?

This story teaches us that we should not always trust our vision, our initial impressions or judgments about the “fitness” of a person for Christian sainthood. God calls whom God chooses. Those who experience God’s grace are the ones who shape the church’s understanding God’s grace. Jesus’ dealing with the demoniac shows us that anyone has the potential to experience profound transformation. We should not judge by personal appearances, by origins and town lore, or even by the tombs in which some people live. Saints are not born but made by mercy. Becoming a saint is the gracious gift of Jesus Christ and has nothing whatsoever to do with what the world sees when it looks at a person. It has nothing to do with how we initially see or treat ourselves.

From the point of view of the townsfolk, it's scary to learn that our safety nets and community resources and best intentions have fallen short of the radical intentions of Jesus. Jesus forces us to face the truth that, with him, no one is beyond saving. *We* accept that there must be dregs at the bottom of the human barrel, not God. *We* are the ones who believe that it's natural for every town to have its outlying tombs, not God. *We* accept the premise of a bottom class and an upper class, *we* build prisons in college towns, *we* point to the slum as the natural justification for the gated community – not God. Not Jesus. No, Jesus holds us to a higher standard of care when dealing with those who are impossible. It is natural to be afraid, and easy “to beg Jesus to leave [the] neighborhood” (Mk. 5:18).

Here's what makes a saint: A saint comes to Jesus, sees the demoniac sitting there with him, clothed and in his right mind, and *asks Jesus to stay*. They *want* the lost to be found, the sick to be made whole, the forsaken to be chosen. They welcome Jesus' unsettling of assumptions; they long for a world without haunted tombs and banished bodies.

Saints know that coming to Jesus *always* means coming to the demoniac. Saints follow Jesus into communion with people that the social order has set apart for despair. The saints never see themselves and Jesus alone; they always see Jesus, themselves, and the man with the legion. After all, this is the same Jesus, who, at the end of his life, is crucified between two criminals. In life and in death, Jesus is with those the world will not be with.

The saints are truly his hands and his feet, carrying his mercy to all places, reaching out to touch with his love every so-called demoniac. They experience their set-apart-ness precisely by going to meet the demoniac in his. This is why they awaken in the rest of us a stirring for *more* – more *courage*, more *imagination*, more *love*, more *grace*.

Friends, on this All-Saints' Day, may God awaken in us a belief in the impossible.

May God bring to our remembrance those who have taught us how to love extravagantly, tenaciously, boldly.

And if, today, we find ourselves assailed inwardly by our own legion of false selves and fears, dysfunctions and demons, may God come to find us and set us free.

May God send us a saint.

Amen.