

Pentecost 2
Isaiah 65:1-9
Psalm 22:19-28
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

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Grace and peace to you from God, our strength and our redeemer - Amen.

What do you need to be set free from?

This is one of the central questions this gospel asks us today, once we strip back the layers of our own suspicion, bewilderment, and maybe even fear that creep into our minds as we hear about this miraculous healing. And I will be the first to admit there is a lot going on in this story that we many never truly understand.

In the passage this morning, Luke speaks of a man who is obviously distressed. He is without the support or aid of his family, and he has been left naked and alone. From our understanding of the first century world we know that anyone could quickly find themselves in a similar position to this man if they crossed one of the societies cultural or religious boundaries. This was because many regions had become governed by strict norms that the community believed kept the order within their lands. So there was little room for anyone to truly belong who appeared or acted in a way that set them apart from their community.

But in saying this, I feel I need to lift up that back in Jesus day, there wasn't the same understanding around the additional support some of us need within the world. There was little to no knowledge around sickness, neglect, abuse, mental health, or those living with addictions. The only thing many of these communities held onto above all else was that right and good order that had kept them safe - and in their minds - also in God's good graces.

So this morning we can safely assume that because this man has been found by Jesus in this state - that somewhere along the line he had been singled out by his community for being different for one reason or another and was cast out.

And as the story stretches on we begin to hear more pieces of this mans life that help us understand his plight. Through his exchange with Jesus we come to understand that he doesn't even remember his true name. Instead he has come to go by a title that would strike fear in the hearts of any who heard it from miles around - "legion".

This name was particularly frightening to those in the surrounding area as it was the common term for the oppressive Roman forces that raided and killed those who opposed their rule.

And so this man, who had been told he wasn't good enough to belong to those he had loved took on the name of all the forces in this world that had put him in this place. The legions of this world - his family and neighbours who had oppressed him, casting him out to live among the dead - entombed by the lack of care and support he had come to experience in his life.

From what do you need to be set free?

This is not just the central question of this gospel - but also of our lives within this world. And when we begin to break down this gospel story, we start to see that this troubled man is not unlike ourselves.

These days we might not cast people out in the same way when their lives become hard or difficult to understand - but there is still a painful stigma that comes to surround and isolate those whose struggles are often deemed unacceptable within our communities.

Some of the most misunderstood and painful stigmas today are carried by those within our community who are living with mental illness or surviving in the midst of addictions. For some living within these worlds, the sense of judgement one can feel is a struggle one learns to survive each day. Whether it is the internal voice that warns us to hide it rather than to risk any additional trouble that may brand us unfit for work, the experiences that cause us to question whether intimate relationships will ever be possible again, or the pain that makes us wonder if we will ever be recognized by anything other than this label again.

And it's not hard to understand this fear as often mental illness and addiction have been made wrongly accused for all sorts of horrible incidents by persons and leaders from our time. And when you come out as someone living with mental illness or addiction it can feel like you yourself are being put on trial.

Having walked with loved ones, friends, and congregants facing the stigma of both of these labels I know that sometimes, you can be left feeling like you are dead to the world. And at its very worst, you would rather be dead at times than deal with the world. So, sometimes it simply becomes easier to live in the tombs. Separated. Disassociated from your life and community - waiting and hoping that something might change someday. And as time goes on you begin to question just with whom you can share this part of your life with. Who can you actually trust? Who will actually come alongside you in support?

But somewhere, somehow, someone along the way takes the chance to hear what is going on in your life and world. Someone takes the time to listen and care. Someone comes along willing to sit among the tombs with you and is there to help you see a way out. A life unchained. A life free to be you regardless of the labels this world has levelled against you. A life that was always meant to be yours. And somehow in the midst of it all you hear the good news - you are still my beloved.

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Beyond the many layers of pain, oppression, and loneliness this gospel story holds - it presents a chance for us to see that this is exactly what Jesus does. He seeks out and finds those who feel lost and alone. And here's the best thing: This isn't just some story that happened once thousands of years ago - *Jesus is still doing* this today! He is still going out of his way, still

crossing boundaries, still daring to meet us in the middle of our tombs, in order to heal and restore us to new life as people of God.

And there is nothing that will keep God from going all out to encounter us where we are. There is nothing that will keep the Spirit from inspiring us to live this newfound gift of freedom. And there is nothing that will keep Christ from calling us to come out of the tombs time and time again - daring us to imagine what living life abundantly means for not only ourselves - but our community.

The Apostle Paul reflects on this fact in our second reading, when he says "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." It's a simple word of acceptance and inclusion, that does not eliminate differences between us but honours and holds them equally in return for us to see. What matters the most is that we are all Children of God. We all belong. We are each worthy of God's attention and care. And nothing will keep God from reaching out to us, finding us, accepting us, releasing us, calling us, loving us just as we are.

And it is this same love, welcome, and embrace that has brought many of us here today. Holy Spirit is a congregation that has long fought to be a place of radical welcome, acceptance, and grace. And this morning, it is our great joy to welcome 5 new members within our congregation - Suzie, Maggie, Brent, Fred, and Sandra - whose lives of faith will be united with ours through Christ and this mission we share.

A mission not founded on whether we good enough, well enough, smart enough, or old enough to make a difference in this world - but one founded in the love and radical welcome of Christ. So today, we gather together as Members of one body - calling each other out from our tombs. To be released in love from the stigma and harm that has come to keep us from truly being known as beloved children of God. And to fill our cups again before we go to share this good news with the world.

So beloved of God, trust and know that Christ is always with you - and that nothing will ever be able to separate you from God's love.

May this truth be so among us - Amen.