



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Bigger than Fear, Stronger than Hate”

Mark 5:1-20

November 25, 2018

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It was the summer after I graduated from college. I was traveling alone in Southeast Asia and ready to cross the border from Thailand into Malaysia. Malaysia had recently changed their laws to crack down on the drug trade. Everywhere, there were signs that read “Death to Drug Traffickers.” Two Australians had recently been convicted and sentenced to death. These folks meant business.

I waited in line to be questioned and for my luggage to be examined. When it was my turn, one of the officers unzipped the top compartment of my backpack. It was a small compartment that was always empty. This time, it wasn't empty. There was a bar of soap in a green plastic travel container. I had never seen it before. Immediately I concluded that someone had planted that bar of soap on me and it contained drugs and I was going to be executed.

I said, “That’s not mine. That’s not my bar of soap. That is not my soap. You have to believe me. That is not my bar of soap.”

“OK,” the border agent said, smiling. He took the bar of soap out of my backpack and threw it away. And then stamped my passport.

I share that story because to cross a border often involves feeling uncertain, vulnerable, afraid. Crossing borders is often difficult. Sometimes dangerous. The Missing Migrants Project, under the auspices of the United Nations, tracks migrants who have died or gone missing in the process of migration towards an international destination. So far this year, 3,242 migrants have died, 348 on the United States-Mexico border.<sup>1</sup>

Statistics like that that make me think that those of us who live in a place of relative safety and personal freedom and economic opportunity should just stay put. Stay at home. Not travel. Not leave. That will keep us safe. Protected. Safe.

The truth is that we are always crossing borders. Every time we read a novel, we leave our life and enter into someone else's. When we eat food from a culture that is not our own, we cross a border. When we listen to certain kinds of music, we are transported from one world into another.

Today's story is about crossing borders. Jesus and the disciples travel into Gentile territory. The text says “they [arrive] at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.” This place is the opposite of all that is familiar to them. Nothing about this place is kosher: the spirits, the tombs, the pigs, the territory.

Jesus is barely out of his boat when a local man confronts him. The text goes to great lengths to describe the strength and self-destructive behavior of this man.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/americas?region=1422>

Something is in the man. An unclean spirit. This is not a single demon. The voice coming from inside the man is clear about that. “I am Legion,” the voice says. The word legion is borrowed from Latin and refers to an army unit of four to six thousand men. This man’s body is filled with demonic troops. Within the man, there is multiplicity, violence, disorder. This is a mob.

Whatever is inside the man prevents him from living a full and abundant life. Whatever is in the man is not of God. Think addiction, war, sexual violence, genocide. That which stands in opposition to God.

Here is where Jesus has a choice. He can get back in the boat and cross back over to the other side. This isn’t his problem. These aren’t his people. Time to head back to Galilee and hunker down and hope that such violence and disorder never come to his homeland. Protect the border. Protect himself and his friends.

Jesus decides that when it comes to fighting evil, when it comes to people having what they need to live an abundant life, there are no borders. He chooses to take on that which is enslaving the man. He confronts the evil that has made life unsafe for the foreigner.

It’s a tricky thing naming what is inside the man. It is clear from this story that there is opposition to that which is good and holy and just. There is opposition to God. It is real. Just look at the cross. Just ask the pigs. The will and way of Jesus is under attack. It’s a tricky thing naming what is inside the man, but this morning I’m going to call it evil.

So, what do we do when we encounter that which is evil? We can do our best not to participate in evil. But that’s not enough. When it comes to evil, we should let the world know where we stand. We need to speak out against it. We need to oppose evil wherever it rears its ugly head. Like Jesus, we need to fight against evil with all that is in us. We need to confront people who commit evil acts. Yes, that’s it. We need to figure out who is perpetrating evil. We need to identify those evil people and put them out of business.

I got a little carried away there. When it comes to evil, it’s easy to get a little carried away.

It has from the very beginning. In her book *The Origin of Satan*, scholar Elaine Pagels explores the way in which the early church deals with opposition. The different factions feel that their way of looking at things is right and that their opponents are wrong. But they take things a step further—claiming that God is on their side and their opponents are agents of the Evil One. Every difference of opinion becomes a skirmish in the cosmic war raging between God’s loyal army and the legions of Satan.<sup>2</sup>

Personally, I think that this tendency to identify as evil those with whom we disagree is a weakness of the Christian tradition. It is at the very least unhelpful to go around naming people and communities and nations as evil.

It would all be so much easier if only there were clearly identified evil people running around committing evil deeds. We could force them to wear giant “E”s on their chests or, better yet, we could separate them from the rest of us and put them all on some deserted island somewhere. But as Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn reminds us, “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”<sup>3</sup>

Hasan Minhaj is an American comedian who had his first break working on *The Daily Show*. He has a comedy special entitled *Homecoming King* that is currently available on Netflix. It’s an amazing piece of work. Minhaj

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*.

is Muslim, the son of parents who emigrated from India. He shares some of his experiences of racism. He speaks of the pain and joy of crossing borders on a regular if not daily basis.

At one point in the show, he shares that his now wife is also Indian and Hindu. He explains why this was a bit of an issue for his family.

Hindus and Muslims are like the Montagues and Capulets of India. We've been warring for centuries. You're like, "What's the difference? You look the same." So how do I explain this? Hindus and Muslims. So Hindus... Hindus don't eat beef. "No beef!" Right? And Muslims, we don't eat pork. "Is that pepperoni pizza? No. No pepperoni!" And then Hindus, they like statues. They're like, "Oh! This is a statue of an elephant. I'm going to put this in my car." Muslims are like, "No statues! Calligraphy! We're about the alphabet. We put that in our car. We're different." And then Hindus, they like cartoons. They're like, "Oh, this is a cartoon Ganesh. I'll just put this on the wall." And Muslims... we don't really, uh, like cartoons. We've got to get better about our cartoon policy. Because of this we've been killing each other for centuries. And I know the older generation doesn't like those jokes. "Pakistan was created because of this reason." I know, but... I convinced my dad [to be welcoming to my fiancée]. "Dad, I love her, she loves me. Isn't there something bigger that unites all of us outside of race, color, creed, class? This is America. We can choose what we want to adhere from the motherland. He agrees. He's like, "That's a good point. Fine. You should get married." That's a Hall of Fame brown dad decision... He says yes.

Minhaj continues.

We rally the troops, Me, Mom, Dad, [my sister] Aisha, we get in the Camry, we're driving to my fiancée's house. And we're about to pull up and we get to the door, and my dad is about to ring the doorbell, when he says the sentence that is the killer of every brown kid's dream. He goes, "I don't think we should do this. 'What will people think?'" I don't know if you know, but every time a brown father says "What will people think", a star actually falls from the sky. "I don't want to be a doctor!" "What will people think!" ... I bet you, when Mahatma Gandhi told his parents he was going to liberate India, even they were like, "What will people think!" And I'm standing there... on that doorstep... "Wait, you want me to change my life because of 'What will people think'? Come on, Dad. How many times do we complain about racism in our community? All the time. Now the ball is in our court, we're going to be bigoted? Dad, I promise you, God doesn't like bigotry. God's not like, 'You're racist. Good job.' No! Number two, you want me to change my life to appease some aunty and uncle I'm never going to see? You want me to change my life for some Aunty? Are you ... kidding me? My life?"<sup>4</sup>

With help from his little sister, Minhaj convinces his father to support the marriage. I love this story because it reminds me that all of us carry around tired old stories that tell us who to distrust and who to love and it's hard to move past them. All of us have blind spots. All of us have borders that we resist crossing. And then there is Jesus who wants to tear down any border that prevent us from seeing all people as beloved, all people as claimed, all people as worthy of God's love and attention and tender care.

We have a common enemy—and it isn't each other. It's that which is inside and outside of us that leads to hatred and hopelessness and division. That's the enemy. Yeah, that's the enemy that we need to take on. But, I'll be honest, I'm not sure we are up for it. It all sounds pretty hopeless and so tedious—battling evil within and without. It's too hard. We can't do it by ourselves.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2017/10/21/hasan-minhaj-homecoming-king-2017-full-transcript/>

No, we can't. But there is another player in all of this. And that player is God.

The promise of the Gospel is that evil—all evil—is subject to God. God is stronger and more powerful than evil and God will ultimately triumph over the evil that is in us and the evil that is outside of us.

That is the promise of the Bible; that is the claim of the tradition; it is what centuries of Christians have proclaimed, preached, taught, debated, defended.

That's what happened that day in the country of the Gerasenes. Evil was defeated and a man had a second chance at a full and abundant life. This defeat was messy and strange but still, on that day, good triumphed over evil, life won out over death, love was stronger than hate.

It was only one day. This episode was a minor skirmish in a much larger battle still being waged. We can read the newspaper headlines or we can look deep into our own hearts and we know—oh, we know—hatred and destruction are alive and well and flourishing.

Evil is real. Evil is powerful. There is only one force in the universe more real. More powerful.

And that is God.

Despite all of the evidence to the contrary, God will have God's gracious way with this world. Justice will triumph. Wars will end. There will be unity and harmony among the nations. Freedom for all people. Someday God will make all things right. We will reach that distant land.

In the meantime, God is on the job. God is with us. God is even now working to redeem this present crisis. And we have our part to play. Our song to sing. As we throw the weight of our life toward those things that matter to God and matter to us: justice, peace, reconciliation, hope.

And in doing so we start catching a glimpse of the way things should be. The way things could be. We catch a glimpse of a distant land...

*(Note: The sermon preached at the 8:45 a.m. service had a slightly different ending. At the conclusion of the sermon at the 11:00 a.m. service, the choir sang John Rutter's "A Distant Land.")*