

WHAT HAVE YOU TO DO WITH ME?

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
June 20, 2010

Last night, I was working late at the church. It's a matter of usually not being able to write during the week because of things happening, and since I normally can't sleep on Saturdays, it's just as well. I'm usually at home typing away. When I turned the keys in the car, the battery was dead. It's a good thing I believe in the resurrection; however, it wasn't helping right then and there so I went in and called a cab.

Moncton is a different city so late at night. The sounds are different. You can hear the vehicles revving their engines, which seem louder in the quiet evening breezes. There are few people walking about, and the darkness is especially dark with the lights in most homes turned off as people sleep. I sat on the curb and waited for the cab to come. As we were driving, I saw a group of people coming out of a building. I commented that I didn't realize that was a bar, to which the cabbie responded. "It's an after-hours bar. It's where the prostitutes and drug dealers go. Bad spot." Thankfully, I didn't have to reveal who I was to elicit such an honest response.

It reminded me, though, that there aren't many of us good, clean Christians in those places. I thought of the times in the Gospels where Jesus goes to places that are outside of his, and pretty much all of our, comfort zones. He didn't stay in the synagogue. He went to the places where those who

needed him most were. I thought of the image of Jesus being in there. Not as someone laughing it up, but simply being who he was, and the people in there knowing who he was. I wondered what kind of healing would happen in such a fractured place, where the light doesn't seem to shine. I wonder if anyone would change their ways and live dependent upon God instead of dependent upon chemicals and the desperation of selling your body in order to eat and have a roof over your head? And to be honest, it's quite often respectable people who seek out these things from other people.

Jesus is in a different place today, outside of his comfort zone. This was the first text I ever preached on, when I was about 19 years old. I didn't have a lot of understanding about the passage, so I just talked about it. I didn't understand then that Jesus was going to a very foreign place, and confronting powers. Changing lives. Sharing himself with the ones who had lost everything, had nothing, and worst of all were cut off from the rest of society. I never knew that Jesus really came to life in those moments and wouldn't let go. He followed, he commanded, and made proclamations, and he never abandoned. Not one of our stories in the Gospels ever says that Jesus walked away from someone. Instead, he got into the pool of water with them, or he rubbed dirt in their eyes after he spit in it, or he touched, and reached out to people. He shouted, and he quietly prayed. But he never left someone alone when they needed him. Whether he looked at someone, like a poor widow giving all she had, or he felt someone touch him, he met the need. He broke the bread, he poured the wine, he fed them, and he dipped his life into theirs.

Every so often we have people coming to the church in need of something, and it's usually immediate. Unfortunately, we can't always meet that need. One day, when I went to the

door, I asked the man his name. He replied, ‘Jesus’. Well, not that I entirely believed him, but I would be darned if I was going to turn Jesus away from the doors of St. John’s United Church, so I said, “Well you better come in then.” Of course, it became obvious soon after that he had mental health issues. And we did what we could. All he really wanted was to talk.

“The fact that Jesus encounters a naked, demoniac (psychotic?) is not surprising. What is surprising is that the fence jumping Jewish Rabbi is not averse to an encounter with this frightened and frightening person. All the rules of culture and religion dictated that it would be best to ignore and avoid a person like this” writes James Liggett.

He continues, “The demoniac on the other hand comes to Jesus and knows who he is. *“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”* He also is reluctant for an encounter with Jesus. *“I beg you, do not torment me”* Here is a person robbed of dignity. Exposed and shamed, symbolised by his nakedness and excluded by reference to his location in the tombs.”

Jesus’ response is to inquire as to the man’s real identity. By asking his name, Leslie Weatherhead suggests, Jesus is asking a question equivalent in the day to a therapist asking in our day, *“How did it all begin? What power is it that is over you“?* The insight that emerges in the narrative suggests that Jesus might have spent a long time in this conversation drawing closer and closer to this rejected and abused human being to get him to a place of trust where he could share his story (his name) with Jesus. Weatherhead goes on to speculate that perhaps the reference to the name “Legion” may be a pointer to the fact that the man was naming atrocities committed by the Roman Legionnaires who controlled the Decapolis.

After Jesus has released him from his afflictions, his desire is to spend the rest of his life beside Jesus. Many of us, who have at least found ourselves in the darkest places in our lives, have encountered a Christ-like person, or a Christ-like blessing, and have returned to a place like the church to simply be reminded of it. What was that moment for you?

The one we call Christ reaches into our fear, and is simply present there. In this case, the man's afflictions couldn't reside in the same place, and so they departed. I wonder, what is that like for you and me? When the demons that possessed the man from Geresene realized that Christ would now occupy this man's heart, they decided it was better to flee into a herd of pigs and drown in a river. When Christ enters our heart, when the God of love and peace and justice finds a home within us, what has to go? Or what is it within us that we don't like that will have to make peace with God in order to dwell within us?

How far does Christ reach inside of us in order to see our own demons? What about those in our society who are cast aside because of our fear of them?

After his experience with Jesus, the man learned to recognize God. The demons knew specifically who Jesus was, even when his disciples don't. They recognized God easily. I was joking with the men repairing the outside of the church this week. One man was fifty feet up, when I said, "You're closer to God than I am!"

In our experience of God, we seek to live our faith by helping others to know Christ in ways that we have. It is why Christians care about the hungry homeless, the teenagers threatened by violence in our Maritime cities. And yes, it's why we care about the sex-trade workers and drug dealers who often find themselves eating a meal in the basement of

an old church after a night of hell on earth. Jesus asks us to lift up those who are bowed down, and asks us to follow.

John Buchanan, a Presbyterian minister, writes in what I believe to be one of the most powerful statements of faith I have recently read, “Sometimes it seems like religion makes it more complicated: that all the paraphernalia of religion—all the creeds, rules, rituals—obscure what is absolutely clear.

True religion, according to our earliest and wisest sources is not ideas, concepts, and theological theses. It is not rules, regulations, restrictions; it is certainly not about excluding people, regarding people as unworthy, flawed, and therefore unimportant and of no particular value.

True religion, according to our oldest and wisest source, is the acknowledgement that our lives come to us daily as a gift from the Creator, the Lord of all, and that remarkably, the Creator cares about us, about human life, every human life, particularly lives that are oppressed, marginalized, limited by suffering, sickness, fear, anxiety, grief, or by political oppression.

True religion is about praising God, trusting God with your life, your future, your salvation, and finally your death, and then because ultimate matters have been resolved, for the rest of your life, joining God in the joyful work of healing the world, respecting, celebrating every human life.”

*For he has not despised or disdained
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.*

Psalm 22