

Second Chances: 2. Rejected

Luke 8:26-29

January 15, 2017

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Have you experienced a second chance? Maybe it was the coach who put you back in the game even after you made a mistake that allowed the other to score. Or the teacher who gave you a failing grade but still believed in you and gave you a chance to improve the grade. Or the marriage that fell apart, but through counseling and a lot of hard work was restored. We all need second chances. But we don't always recognize the chance we've been given. One night when I was 16, I was thrown from the back of a pickup. I was standing up mostly because I was 16 and wasn't thinking. I've not forgotten the scream from the woman standing in her front yard as she saw the back of my head hit the pavement. And because I wasn't bleeding much and I thought I would get my friend, Mike, in trouble, I asked him to take me home. I crawled upstairs and went to bed and when friends showed up to check on me and my parents realized what had happened and called the doctor – I spent the next week in the hospital. And when I was released from the hospital, the doctor told me that he was surprised I lived. At the time, I dismissed what he said – after all I was 16 and I thought 16 year olds lived forever. It's only a second chance only when you claim it. Years later, I looked back on that experience and realized, it was a second chance.

All of us are in need of second chances, a fresh start. In this series we are looking at ways that Jesus offered people second chances. Today, our focus is on the healing ministry of Jesus. As we read about his life, we see how over and over again he heals people who appear to be hopeless causes. He seems drawn to hopeless causes. There was the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years and no one could help her, but Jesus heals her. There was the man born blind. No one could change that, but Jesus healed him. Or the story of the little girl who died, and he touched her and her life returned. They were hopeless causes. And in today's story, we find a man whose behavior was so scary that people locked him up in chains. They believed he was possessed by demons. Two thousand years ago, the diagnosis for anything that was unexplainable was the work of demons – physical ailments, fevers, seizures, sadness and depression. It was all the work of demons. There was no concept at all of mental illness. But I think as we look into this story, the message Jesus wants us to hear today is about mental illness.

Let me ask: how are you doing physically? What's your physical condition? I had a physical a few weeks ago and the doctor said, "you're not as healthy as you think. Your blood pressure is too high and you've gained too much weight." And he wanted me to begin taking blood pressure medicine, but I convinced him to give me 3 months to reduce my weight and my blood pressure without medication. He's doubtful I can do it, but he gave me three months. How are you doing? My guess is that many of us have something. I might be a sore knee, a bad back, or we're carrying around too much weight. Or maybe you've come down with a cold or you get the flu even after getting a flu shot. Or maybe you stayed too late last night and you're not feeling your best. If we're honest, none of us are physically fit 100% of the time. And when it comes to mental illness, the same is true. The brain is working all of the time. It receives all kinds of sensory data, processing it and causing us to respond – and the brain keeps working 24/7 decade after decade after decade. It's amazing. But sometimes our brains suffer. It might be some trauma that injures the brain, or it might be a chemical imbalance and sometimes medication is necessary to restore the balance. Or sometimes there are emotional wounds from the past – something happened to us as a child or it happened to our parents or words were spoken to you and every time you remember you feel anxious or angry. Just as none of us are

100% physically, none of us are always 100% fit mentally. We all are ill at least at certain points – anxious, depressed, insecure.

Mental illness is not something that happens to some but not others. We all experience mental illness. That's important to understand because our culture often stigmatizes people with mental illness, and if we stigmatize, we don't want to admit we might have a problem. We don't want to be associated with one of them – so we don't seek help. One of my concerns whenever there is a mass shooting and the question of the shooter's mental health becomes a topic of conversation is that just because someone is mentally ill doesn't mean he or she will shoot people. There are people with successful careers who have a mental illness and are being treated. The National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) says that 1 in 5 adults in this country experiences mental illness in a given year. Last Sunday we had 220 persons in this service. That would mean 44 experiences mental illness at some point in 2016 and another 44 might experience mental illness in this year. Most illnesses last for a short time and then they're gone. Some get better over time but may need medication or therapy. And still others experience a chronic illness that they must learn to manage. It might be depression or a bipolar condition. On the outside we can't see what's going on inside. So this morning my aim is how does Jesus look at people who are mentally ill? And how does Jesus respond?

Jesus has been teaching and preaching in the region of Galilee. One day he says to his disciple, "let's go to the other side of the lake." This lake that we know as the Sea of Galilee is 8 miles wide and 13 miles long. The west side is the Jewish side and the east side is the Gentile side. So when Jesus says, let's go to the other side of the lake, they thought – why would we do that? No righteous Jew would ever go over there. They raise pigs and eat them. And they don't follow God. To cross the lake would take hours and as they looked to the sky, it was obvious that a storm was approaching. The lake was the last place you wanted to be during a thunderstorm. But Jesus says, I have someone over there that I must see and I can't wait. So they get in the boat, and Jesus climbs in the back and promptly falls asleep. Half way across the lake, the storm hits – wind and waves crash over the side and the disciples are terrified. They wake Jesus up and he calms the wind and the waves and he says to them, where's your faith? They keep rowing until they reach the shore and they're at a cemetery. Immediately, a man runs up to Jesus, falls at his feet, shouting "**What have you to do with me Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me.**" This is the man that Jesus has come to see.

Here's how Luke describes him **The man was from the city and was possessed by demons. For a long time, he had lived among the tombs, naked and homeless.** Mark's gospel adds a few more details: **...no one was ever strong enough to restrain him, even with a chain. He had been secured many times with leg irons and chains, but he broke the chains and smashed the leg irons. No one was tough enough to control him. Night and day in the tombs and the hills, he would howl and cut himself with stones.** Do you have a picture of this man? Jesus asks his name and he replies, "Legion, for we are many." Everyone can see he is demon-possessed. If you met this man, what would you do? Call 911? They would come and take him to HCMC or Fairview to a psychiatric unit for observation. What might the diagnosis be? Some have suggested that this man's diagnosis might be what today we call Dissociative Identity Disorder or multiple personalities. Maybe it was demons, but today I think we have the tools to see this differently. What's Dissociative Identity Disorder? It often occurs in response to extreme emotional or sexual abuse as a child. As a way of surviving, the brain isolates a personality as a place to go – and if the abuse continues, there might be another identity formed and then another and what the brain is trying to do is protect this child who could not survive the pain inflicted over and over again. Does that help you see this man among tombs any differently?

I wonder if Jesus didn't see the man but also see what he had suffered as a child, the abuse inflicted by a trusted adult and as the child grew up in the midst of pain, trying to cope, he starts speaking and acting like someone else. And how do the other children respond to him? They tease him, make fun of him, push him away. Their parents don't want their children playing with him because he's filled with demons. And as he gets older, he grows angry about what he's experienced and how he's been treated and every time people are around he flies into a rage. People say he's stark raving mad! So what do the townspeople do? There's no psychiatric hospital – no concept of mental illness – so they put him in chains so he won't hurt other people. Eventually he grows strong enough to take a stone and break the chains. Finally, he takes refuge among the tombs where people will leave him alone. He walks among the tombs and at night he howls with anger and cuts himself to escape the deeper pain that will not cease. Do you see him?

Jesus has taken a boat ride for several hours through a raging storm in order to meet with this one man. What does that tell you about how Jesus feels about people with mental illness? I think Jesus is showing us his heart and asking us as followers to have the same heart toward those others would reject. In the story, the legion don't want to be destroyed. "Send us into the pigs." So Jesus says, "Go." There are two ways to look at this – either these were demons who enter the pigs, run over the cliff into the lake and drown, or maybe Jesus wants the man to know these other identities are gone. Either way, the man is set free. The owners of the pigs are watching all this, and they run into town to tell other what has happened and how their pigs were destroyed. **They came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone. He was sitting at Jesus' feet, fully dressed and completely sane. They were filled with awe.** Some translations say they were terrified. Something had happened that they could not explain and they were so afraid that they begged Jesus to leave. But before he leaves, we see what this story has to do with second chances. Jesus has healed this man, restored him to health and he's given a fresh start, a new purpose. The man begs to go along with Jesus as one of his disciples, but Jesus says, **Return home and tell the story of what God has done for you.** Using the pain of his past for good, he becomes the first missionary to the Gentiles. He's healed for a purpose – a fresh start. What a testimony he must have had, because he had received a second chance.

We all need second chances. As I was writing this message, I looked up and notice this rock that someone had given me years ago. It's a geode – a rock that looks like this. It forms as a result of a small cavity in the ground and over thousands of years, minerals seep into that cavity forming this rock. But inside the rock, there lies something far more beautiful than what we see on the outside. And the person who gave this to me, cut the geode in half, polished the side that was cut and what we see is this beautiful agate with crystals covering the inside. In the master's hands, something that looks like this becomes this – a fresh start. And that's what God can do for each of us.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of January 15, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, you know the places where each of us struggles and carries a heavy load. By your grace and your power, help us to move forward in the light of your hope and grace so that our load will be lightened and others will see what you have done in our lives. Amen.

Monday, January 16

Scripture: Mark 1:21-26; 32-34

Jesus and his followers went into Capernaum. Immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and started teaching. The people were amazed by his teaching, for he was teaching them with authority, not like the legal experts. Suddenly, there in the synagogue, a person with an evil spirit screamed, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God." "Silence!" Jesus said, speaking harshly to the demon. "Come out of him!" The unclean spirit shook him and screamed, then it came out.

That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. The whole town gathered near the door. He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

Observation: In Jesus' day, most of today's medical and psychological insights into human pain didn't exist. Nearly all inexplicable ills were called "demon possession". On the other hand, nothing we know about epilepsy or mental illness would automatically lead a person to rightly identify Jesus as "the holy one from God." The central reality is the same, however much or little we believe in literal demons. Then, and now, humans need physical, emotional and spiritual healing.

Application: Verse 34 used a Semitic idiom that implied that Jesus healed everyone brought to him. In his day's view, that also took in nearly every human ailment: he healed "all kinds of diseases" and cast out "many demons." Today, God usually works through people with human training in physical and emotional healing—but it's still God at work. What hurt(s) do you bring to Jesus today? Are you open to whatever type of help and healing he gives you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you did not stay comfortable and safe while destructive forces were loose in the world you created. Give me the caring and courage to enlist as one of your servants in working with you to heal those who hurt for any reason. Amen.

Tuesday, January 17

Scripture: Mark 5:1-5

Jesus and his disciples came to the other side of the lake, to the region of the Gerasenes. As soon as Jesus got out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out of the tombs. This man lived among the tombs, and no one was ever strong enough to restrain him, even with a chain. He had been secured many times with leg irons and chains, but he broke the chains and smashed the leg irons. No one was tough enough to control him. Night and day in the tombs and the hills, he would howl and cut himself with stones.

Observation: The central figure (besides Jesus) in this week's central story lived like an animal. He was terrifyingly strong, unstable, living isolated "among the tombs," where "he would howl and cut himself with stones." He was not just "unemployable"—he was, for the people of his area, completely uncontrollable, except to drive him out of their environs. It's hard to imagine a person who more urgently needed a second chance!

Application: This man was frightening, a violent, disturbed outcast. Yet even meeting him in a weird, scary setting ("among the tombs"), Jesus maintained his calm self-possession. What

enabled Jesus to resist fear in situations that trigger it in most people? Do you believe his quiet confidence created a more supportive, safe environment for others to change their lives for the better?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when you met a man from whom everyone else wanted to run away, you cared, and you healed. Thank you for being willing to care about and heal the parts of me that frighten even me. Amen.

Wednesday, January 18

Scripture: Mark 5:6-13

When he saw Jesus from far away, he ran and knelt before him, shouting, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" He said this because Jesus had already commanded him, "Unclean spirit, come out of the man!" Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He responded, "Legion is my name, because we are many." They pleaded with Jesus not to send them out of that region. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the hillside. "Send us into the pigs!" they begged. "Let us go into the pigs!" Jesus gave them permission, so the unclean spirits left the man and went into the pigs. Then the herd of about two thousand pigs rushed down the cliff into the lake and drowned.

Observation: Some world religions picture good and evil as equally strong, fighting eternally for supremacy. Even some Christians want to identify demonic forces, which they may portray as terribly strong. Yet when the gospels pictured demons, they always said the spirits feared Jesus and cowered before his power. The gospel writers were convinced the battle between good and evil was hopelessly one-sided for the forces of evil, that God's power was far, far greater.

Application: One clear message from this story was that evil is ultimately self-destructive. The forces haunting the man, whatever their exact nature, brought him no good, but triggered self-injurious behavior. Then, when Jesus granted the request to go into the pigs (a clear sign that he was in Gentile territory), the demons promptly destroyed their new "abode." In what ways have you seen evil's destructive nature, in yourself or in others you know?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in the end, you healed the evil in our world by allowing the legions to do their worst to you. Send your healing, and your sacrificial spirit, into my heart. Amen.

Thursday, January 19

Scripture: Mark 5:14-17

Those who tended the pigs ran away and told the story in the city and in the countryside. People came to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the man who used to be demon-possessed. They saw the very man who had been filled with many demons sitting there fully dressed and completely sane, and they were filled with awe. Those who had actually seen what had happened to the demon-possessed man told the others about the pigs. Then they pleaded with Jesus to leave their region.

Observation: Those who had tended the pigs ran into town to tell the wild tale. Curious, many people came out to the area of the tombs. There they saw the man who had been such an outcast and source of fear and disorder now "fully dressed and completely sane." You'd think the response would have been, "Wonderful! How did this happen?" Instead, sadly, when they heard about the lost herd of pigs, they begged Jesus to leave their region. Apparently for them the value of ham and bacon outweighed seeing a man restored to life and health.

Application: Psychologists have observed that even positive change can make us nervous, or even depressed. So it makes a sad kind of sense that the townspeople were bothered seeing the man dressed and calm—it was not what they had grown accustomed to. What positive change would you like to see in your life? What fears are making it hard for you to actually move toward changing?

Prayer: Jesus, if I'm comfortable when I shouldn't be, please disturb my life. And give me the courage to work with you to make the positive changes I long to see happen. Amen.

Friday, January 20

Scripture: Mark 5:18-20

While he was climbing into the boat, the one who had been demon-possessed pleaded with Jesus to let him come along as one of his disciples. But Jesus wouldn't allow it. "Go home to your own people," Jesus said, "and tell them what the Lord has done for you and how he has shown you mercy." The man went away and began to proclaim in the Ten Cities all that Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed.

Observation: It made sense that the man wanted to stay with Jesus, who had healed and restored him. But a profound sense of mission had sent Jesus across the lake, and into Gentile territory, to heal a desperate man who lived among the tombs. Jesus shared that mission with the restored man, sending him back to his village to "tell them what the Lord has done for you." This man was the first missionary to the Gentiles.

Application: One spiritual truth that sometimes hurts is that any kind of healing God gives us is never just for our own sake. Of course God wants to see us physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy—but God also wants us to become his hands and voice to restore others to health. Who worked with God to bring healing into your life? How can you extend that healing to others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you haven't redeemed me just so I can hoard your grace and love for myself. Guide me and empower me for God's mission in the world, which you've called me to join in. Amen.

Saturday, January 21

Scripture: Matthew 4:23-24; 11:28-30

Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all those who had various kinds of diseases, those in pain, those possessed by demons, those with epilepsy, and those who were paralyzed, and he healed them.

"Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light."

Observation: Jesus was always healing. He healed and restored common people to wholeness and elevated them to a sense of worth. His ministry overcame ignorance, disease, and demonic attacks; it was a ministry designed to liberate and enable people to be their best in the grace of

God. Jesus didn't limit his actions to any one type of human affliction. He offered everyone divine rest and healing.

Application: Jesus' words about a "light burden" and giving us "rest" spoke to people who found themselves weighed down by a rule-bound, guilt-producing idea of what it means to serve God. But they also spoke to people whose lives were made heavy and difficult by the power and results of evil forces. In what ways are you "struggling hard and carrying heavy loads"? Could Jesus be speaking to the painful, heavy realities in your life: "You will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light."

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you already know the places where I struggle and carry a heavy load. By your grace and your power, help me to move forward with the glow of your hope and grace lightening my load(s). Amen.