

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
June 28, 2015**

Mark 5

The U.S. Supreme Court has expanded a right for its citizens. We have made the circle wider. In this case, it is equal access to the institution of marriage and all the privileges and responsibilities it entails. That is one of the main functions of a government to establish rights – and protect all, the weak and strong, the majorities and the minorities. As an American, I am pleased and proud our country has made this historic decision. It is a time to celebrate how far we have come while recognizing there is still more to do for equal opportunity for all.

The Episcopal Church has made significant progress in this area recently but we still have a ways to go for equality in marriage. At Calvary, we are ahead of the curve. We do not have gay weddings or straight weddings or any split sacrament. We have weddings done well with dignity and beauty and, hopefully, good taste. It is our call and intention to treat and love everyone the same as God does as if Christ were standing right in front of us.

The State establishes and protects rights for its citizens. The Church has a different role. The Church works to bring God's redemption, reconciliation, and restoration through Jesus Christ.

That's the Good News in the Gospel of Mark today. What Jesus offers is more than healing, as important as that is for the person who needs it. Jesus offers redemption, reconciliation, and restoration. There are three stories right in a row that demonstrate this. Taken together, they are three parts of a whole all in chapter 5 of the Gospel of Mark.

The first part of the story is found just before what we read today. Jesus went with his disciples by boat to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. The sea is only 8 miles at its widest. It was the land of the Gerasenes who were more Roman or Greek in culture than Jewish. We know this for several reasons, one of which is that pigs were there. Swine were considered ritually unclean by Jews who would not touch, let alone eat, them. Jesus was among foreigners.

While there a local man, who was possessed by an unclean spirit, saw Jesus and ran to him. Most of the biblical accounts of demon possession we would now consider various forms of mental illness. Be that as it may, consider this man's

predicament. He was living among the tombs cut off from everyone. The Greek word for where he lived can be translated as “the space between two places” or an “empty place.” The man was nowhere and alone. Those who *were* around tried to lock him up. He could not work. He suffered from physical, mental, and emotional anguish. He had so many problems his demons were called Legion. Jesus healed the man of his unclean spirits driving them into the swine who rushed over the cliff into the sea, out of sight out of his mind, leaving him a new man.

That’s where today’s reading picks up the story. Jesus crossed back to the west side of the Sea of Galilee among a crowd of his own people. Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, approached Jesus. He was Jewish, respected, presumably well off, and part of the religious establishment that was supposed to have nothing to do with Jesus who seemed to associate with anyone and everyone. None of that mattered to the parent whose twelve-year old daughter was dying. He was desperate – and this was his last hope, his last card to play. Jesus healed his daughter.

In the midst of that hopeless situation, another was taking shape. A woman who suffered from bleeding for twelve years saw her one chance to be well. She slipped through the crowd in the confusion just to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment. If she could touch God, she would be whole again. She was Jewish. She may have had family or friends but they were nowhere to be found. She had been to all the doctors but they made her suffering worse and took all her money.

Being sick for twelve years would exhaust anyone but it’s actually much worse than that. Her condition made her ritually unclean. Because of this, she was not allowed in the very synagogue Jairus led. She was not allowed to worship as her customs dictated. Because of her condition, she was cut off from family and friends and livelihood reduced to begging. Anyone who touched her would become unclean. She was taking a great risk violating the rules by intentionally touching a rabbi and risking *his* ritual purity. Everything and everyone she touched was defiled. What does that do to a person? Imagine, all that time of desperation with poor health, no work, little income – no kisses, no hugs, no meaningful human contact for 12 years. What would you do? She did the only thing she could, reached out for God, and was healed.

Separately, these three stories on two sides of the Sea of Galilee are a little weird. Together, they begin to develop an image of who and what Jesus is. He *did* associate with just anyone and everyone. Did you notice what happens when all three are seen together? The accounts of healing include male and female, young and old, Jew and Gentile, kinsman and foreigner, rich and poor, clean and unclean, religious and not necessarily so. The point is – everyone is offered redemption, reconciliation, and restoration through Christ. No one is left out.

Jesus recognized each of the three people as persons and addressed their concerns. He healed all three but did much more than that. Jesus saw them when no one else did. He recognized them for who they were. The man possessed, the desperate father, and the woman alone. They were so much more than that, just as we are each more than one, simple definition.

They had exhausted all they knew and were clinging to their last shred of hope. All three wanted to be whole again or for the first time. None of the three had chosen their condition. As far as we know, not one did anything to deserve what happened to be cut off from God, family and friends, and even from self. It really doesn't matter if they chose it or not. Jesus directly addressed each of the three. Through his actions he proclaimed, "You are a person with dignity. You are a child of God, too." All three are made clean. All are made worthy. All are called good.

Redemption is reuniting with God. Reconciliation is reuniting with family and community. Restoration is the beginning of making a self whole. None is the end of the story. What Jesus offers is not a finished product but a new beginning of a life we make together in Christ.

We, as a Church, carry on Jesus' ministry in the world and in our neighborhood. That's what we do and who we are. We are called to associate with just anyone and everyone. Through weddings and baptisms, through teaching and serving, through welcoming and loving. We recognize people for who they truly are. We embrace everyone the same, as if Christ were standing right in front of us.