

Tender

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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SCRIPTURE READING Mark 5:1-20

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. ²And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; ⁴for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷and he shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.' ⁸For he had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' ⁹Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' ¹⁰He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹²and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.' ¹³So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.

¹⁴ The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. ¹⁶Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. ¹⁸As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹But Jesus refused, and said to him, 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.' ²⁰And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

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Prayer

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I will be honest, I was looking to the Holy Spirit to connect the lectionary Gospel for today with the final topic of our covenant series. As of Thursday, she hadn't made an obvious bridge. Reflecting with Bible Study I also recognized that this morning's text needs its own sermon. It's a complicated text, and it touches on such a tender experience that is part of most of our lives that we can't skip this one. So - maybe I am making up for the fact that lately on Communion Sundays I skip preaching altogether - I am going to preach two (shorter) sermons today.

Let's start with our scripture reading. This is the longest single story Mark tells, apart from Jesus' passion. In Mark, every word is chosen with intention - and I think Mark intended this story to have multiple layers of meaning. At least four, in fact.

At the outset, Jesus crosses the sea and steps into new territory - a Gentile region. He heals a Gentile. So this is a signal from Mark that Jesus will minister to people of many different backgrounds. And this is good news to anyone who hears it - that Jesus' healing and compassion are for everyone. So the first piece of good news is Jesus' inclusive ministry.

But Jesus is not just in Gentile territory. He's in Roman territory, too. The Decapolis - ten Roman occupied cities. And the demons that are holding the man Jesus helps call themselves Legion - an allusion to the Roman military. In this early part of Mark, Jesus is showing that God's power is greater than the oppression of Rome. Ched Myers says, "The demoniac represents collective anxiety over Roman Imperialism..."¹ So the second piece of good news is a message for people living under Roman occupation.

The third layer comes from what Jesus asks of this man, when the Legion of demons has gone. Jesus commissions him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." As we noted in Bible study this week, the man is to share good news. He's to tell people they are not alone and God is merciful and loving.

The fourth layer, and maybe the most tender, and a layer that deserves so much more attention than I can give it this morning, is that this is a story of a person experiencing a mental health crisis. He is crying out in pain. He has multiple demons - perhaps that means what we would term multiple diagnoses. And like so many in our own day, due to his mental illness this man has been rejected by his community. A simple faith healing isn't going to move someone in that kind of crisis to wellbeing. But there is good news in this tender story, the kind of good news that could be *part* of wellness for someone facing a mental health crisis. In combination with modern tools like

¹ *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 194.

medication, therapy and treatment, there are things that happen in this story that are good news for people today. Jesus says go to your people - and the man does find community. Jesus shows him love and compassion - and that's good news, too - and a commission for us to show love and compassion. This is a tender story of someone in pain who gets better - in other words, this is a hopeful story.

So now I'm going to switch topics entirely...time for a breath pause, a stretch break....though, perhaps, there *is* a connection. Maybe the connection between these two topics is *tenderness*. An invitation to kindness, compassion, respectfulness, love of neighbor.

In 2005, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ - the national gathering of delegates from local churches, nominated by regional associations and conferences - met to do the business of the national setting of the church in Atlanta. At that General Synod, 80% of voting delegates raised Yes placards for a resolution affirming equality in marriage for couples regardless of gender.²

The headlines made it sound like the national setting of the UCC declared that all local UCC churches would affirm same gender marriage. But you have to know something about the UCC: our structure is covenantal, not hierarchical. In practice, what that meant in 2005 was that the resolution guided the practice of the national setting of the UCC including in advocacy for civil marriage equality. But General Synod spoke *to* other settings of the church, not *for* them. It spoke to conferences, associations, local churches, individual members - not on behalf of the entire church. Each of those settings was asked to listen and consider prayerfully its own discernment of this issue. That's the literal language of the resolution - "...General Synod calls upon all settings of the United Church of Christ to engage in serious, respectful, and prayerful discussion...."³ This is an example of our covenant polity. We listen to each other but we don't proscribe beliefs, and decisions are not made by the national setting, or the conference on behalf of the local church.

Related to 2005's resolution, 49 congregations disaffiliated from the UCC. 29 congregations voted to join the UCC. That was less than 1% leaving, and less than half a percent entering.

This doesn't say anything about the number of UCC churches that were Open and Affirming in 2005 - that was a local church decision and I think at that point less than a quarter of UCC churches were ONA? As of 2023, by the way, 36.2% of UCC churches

² https://www.ucc.org/marriage_equality_and_lgbtq_rights/

³ <https://new.uccfiles.com/pdf/2005-EQUAL-MARRIAGE-RIGHTS-FOR-ALL.pdf>

nationwide, and over half of UCC churches in Massachusetts, are Open and Affirming. Now, here at Pilgrim, this congregation through prayerful discernment and strong lay leadership became ONA in 2002 - and I don't know the year when Pilgrim affirmed marriage equality but I have heard of Rev. Judy Brain's leadership in that moment. We know today that being ONA and supporting same-gender loving couples is one of our key values in this congregation.

That's a little tiny bit of history of the UCC and Pilgrim at the intersection of Polity - how decisions are made - and LGBT+ inclusion.

I offer that UCC history because someone asked me what's up with one of our sibling denominations, the United Methodist Church, right now. I have to remind you here that I grew up United Methodist and I love the Wesleyan tradition, and I have many close friends in the UMC. So this rift is *tender to me*. I am also aware that because I'm not inside the UMC anymore I want to be very careful in my words, very compassionate toward the pain so many people are experiencing right now. None the less, I'm going to try to say a little bit.

The rift in the UMC *seems* centered on LGBT+ inclusion. And that rift has resulted in 30% of the US congregations in that denomination disaffiliating.

You can look at that particular rift many ways. On the surface it *seems* to be a fracture in scriptural interpretation within the denomination. If you ask - how can folks exclude LGBT people from the full ministry of the church, those who don't allow queer folk to marry or be ordained will inevitably turn to "Clobber" passages within the Bible.⁴ And folks in Reconciling congregations (like our ONA) interpret those Clobber passages differently and, as we at Pilgrim do, cling passionately to Jesus' radical love and inclusion. So, some United Methodists *are* divided along scriptural interpretation lines.

But how does that lead to 30% of US UMC churches leaving? And why didn't that happen in the UCC in a similarly dramatic moment? This is where we have to look at structure and polity.

The UMC operates differently than the UCC. There is more hierarchical structure and firm doctrine. Pastors are appointed rather than called by the local congregation; local church properties and funds are owned by the denomination. There's a similar process of appointing delegates from local congregations to vote in meetings - but the votes at those national meetings lead often to binding policies defining doctrine, theology and

⁴ Highly recommended reading on these passages: **UnClobber**: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality by Colby Martin

practice at the local level. That includes national policies against ordaining queer folk or officiating at same-gender marriages...but they were not universally enforced. In 2019 there was an effort to move toward policies of greater LGBT inclusion that didn't pass their national process. That's when a rift began to be predicted - with the expectation that LGBT-inclusive congregations would leave. "But in the end, the vast majority of departing congregations reflect conservative dismay over what they saw as the denomination's failure to discipline those defying church law."⁵

Now, it gets even more complicated. The UMC created a process by which churches could disaffiliate (leave) and take their money and property with them - but only if they did so by the end of 2023. Remember that the UMC denomination usually retains the local church's resources. So suddenly churches considering leaving - if they wanted to keep their bank accounts and buildings - had a deadline.

One of the leading bishops of the UMC said, "This whole disaffiliation process has in large measure not been about human sexuality, it's been about power, control and money."⁶

Now, there's a lot more to come in the UMC - the process that has played out in the US will also play out internationally since half of UMC churches are outside of the US. And there's a guess that the policies and doctrine of the US church will move toward full LGBT inclusion, but the future is unknown.

I think religious folks are all actually congregational these days. Some UMC congregations defied the national setting a long time ago and became Reconciling (like ONA). Every UMC congregation has discerned and had the chance to vote on which side of the schism to land. Habit, whatever your folks did, wherever you've gone all your life, tradition no longer holds us to a church or denomination, individually or corporately. We're all kind of congregational.

But all week, trying to put together a sermon on comparative polity, I came back to something that has nothing to do with decision making process, nor even what folks believe around LGBT inclusion. I kept coming back to the pain folks are experiencing. Our siblings are hurting. Folks who've had a home in the UMC for a long time but find themselves displaced from their home congregation because it's joined the Global Methodist Church - they're grieving.⁷ Congregations who support inclusion - like many

⁵ <https://religionnews.com/2023/12/15/one-fourth-of-united-methodist-churches-in-us-have-left-in-schism-over-lgbtq-ban-what-happens-now/>

⁶ <https://religionnews.com/2023/12/15/one-fourth-of-united-methodist-churches-in-us-have-left-in-schism-over-lgbtq-ban-what-happens-now/>

⁷ <https://religionnews.com/2023/12/18/how-a-remnant-group-of-united-methodists-found-their-way/>

of our neighboring congregations in this area - are bewildered to say goodbye to their extended Christian family. They're wondering what happens next. There's grief and trauma in this schism.

So if you know someone who's Methodist, I'd say speak tenderly to them. They need a loving word these days. Amen.