

**Bad For Business
But Good For The Soul
Mark 5:1-20
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
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On the day after Christmas 1973 Warner Brothers released *The Exorcist*, a horror film that profoundly effected people, perhaps more so than any horror film up to that time probably because unlike fictional characters like Dracula and the Wolfman, most people believe the Devil is real. After Dracula finally has that take driven through his heart and the lights come back on you come back to reality and readily acknowledge there are no vampires. But if you know your Bible, you also know Satan isn't a figment of some storyteller's vivid imagination.

So, not surprisingly a lot of movie goers in 1973 were spooked by *The Exorcist*. I remember a caravan of fraternity brothers at my college, some of them big brawny football players, all slept together in the same room with the lights on for almost a week.

Now, how do we moderns handle the topic of exorcism, driving out demonic spirits from people, places and things? Two hundred years ago it was universally believed bizarre, aberrant behavior was caused by a demon possession. Today modern psychiatry has determined most of these cases being some form of physical or psychological disorders. Even so exorcisms are still, if rarely, performed today after carefully ruling out any and all possible medical conditions. At the same time most Christian denominations recognize the veracity of exorcisms and some even have proscribed rituals.

Now, you might be wondering, "Why is he suddenly talking about demon possession and exorcisms? It's all very unPresbyterian." Maybe so, we Presbyterians usually don't openly talk about these things. But since we have authoritative stories in the Bible that report Jesus performing exorcisms, we need to be careful not to deconstruct these stories to suit our enlightened sensibilities. I believe it's a mistake not to assume Jesus cast out demons when the scriptures tell us he did. If Jesus was treating a schizophrenic, someone diagnosed with a medical condition, wouldn't Jesus who was quintessentially discerning be able to tell the difference? And since he could, would Jesus be in character if he let his disciples think otherwise?

So, I believe we must assume Jesus actually performed exorcisms. Interpreting this passage in any other way would emasculate the story, leaving it without anything worthwhile saying

Let's now take a closer look at this passage from Mark's gospel to hear what it does have to say to us.

We read Jesus and his disciples just arrived in Gerasenes, a Gentile territory across the lake from Galilee. By the way, it was while crossing the lake they sailed right into that ferocious storm Jesus calmed in the middle of the night proving even the winds and waves obeyed him. And almost immediately after making landfall, Jesus showed he had authority over an even more ferocious adversary.

Mark reports just as Jesus stepped ashore he encountered a demon possessed man who lived in isolation in the local cemetery. Right away the man was driven to fall down before Jesus, and the demons asked through him, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God. I beg you do not torment me."

Let's get this straight. The man wasn't talking, the demons were talking through him. How else do you explain Jesus being immediately recognized? The demons automatically cowered knowing they were no match for him, especially after Jesus asked, "What is your name?"

Recognizing Jesus' authority the demon had to answer honestly. He said, "Legion" because the poor man was possessed by many. Remember, the Roman Empire conquered that part of the world and a legion was a regiment of five to six thousand Roman soldiers, the implication being the Roman Empire was itself demonic.

Whatever your interpretation, the metaphor is spot on: the power of evil dominates, consumes and destroys people, places and things. What St. Paul called the powers and principalities of this present age are diametrically opposed to the Kingdom of God and of his Christ, who on the contrary loves, inspires and creates. It's God's intention to raise us up, it's Satan's obsession to drag us down. God is love. Satan is hate, and only God stands between us and him. It should be no surprise, with one word, Jesus expelled the demons and restored the man's life. But how it happened has ongoing implications for the rest of the story.

Mark reports the demons begged Jesus not to order them into the abyss, that is, to the bottomless pit from whence they came. For some reason, known only to himself, Jesus allowed the demons to enter into a herd of swine who then stampeded themselves into the lake where the pigs drowned and the demons were disembodied.

Now here's where the story turns. The swine herders ran off to tell everyone, especially the owners of the herd what happened. Naturally they quickly arrived on the scene finding their neighbor completely restored and sitting

at Jesus' feet. Oddly enough there was no rejoicing over getting their friend back. Instead they immediately let Jesus know he overstayed his welcome and should leave, the sooner the better.

Though Mark doesn't reveal the people's reason for urging Jesus' departure, it's fairly obvious. Jesus was bad for business! The people made a very good living raising pigs, probably for the Roman legions stationed in their territory. Apparently their pocketbooks were more important than a man's life. As far as the local business leaders were concerned Jesus' act of mercy was just a wanton destruction of their private property. Jesus was bad for business.

You'd agree there's something intrinsically evil about putting profits over the sanctity of human life especially if it means destroying life to save your business. At the same time there's something inherently decent about people of good will who stand up to industries that put profits over people.

In our history people of faith worked against slavery and later worked for humane working conditions, fair compensation and child labor laws in factories and mines. The slave owners and factory owners, many of them proper church members and philanthropists turned a blind eye to the human suffering they caused because it was good for business.

An argument can be made today's environmental catastrophe in the Gulf is another sorry example of putting profits over people. If the allegations are true, BP executives intentionally and perhaps illegally cut corners and ignored regulations to save money even when their own experts warned against it. Why? It was good for business.

So, what's the connection between these examples of corporate malfeasance and today's Gospel passage? At first glance there seems to be none. Mark reports Jesus saved the life of a man possessed by demons which isn't something we have any first-hand experience with and quite frankly, we don't want to. But we can see a connection when we consider the townspeople's reaction to the exorcism: again, no celebrations or expressions of thanksgiving over their neighbor's release from his suffering, only concern over the loss of their property and profits.

What does that have to do with us especially since none of us are captains of industry whose prime directive is to show ever increasing profits to our shareholders even at the expense of innocent people's health, safety and overall quality of life?

Primarily this: never seek to profit or advance yourself financially, socially or otherwise at the expense of someone else's quality of life. Second, always be prepared when called upon to sacrifice yourself financially, socially or otherwise if it means guaranteeing someone else's quality of life.

At the same time never underestimate what Paul called the Powers and Principalities of this present age. There is evil in the world and unchecked self-interest can give even the best of us a case of temporary blindness that will keep us from seeing ourselves participating in business and social activities not worthy of Christ and his Kingdom. Yes, we can stand on our heads rationalizing our acts of self-advancement at other's expense, but as the demon Screwtape advised his nephew and protégé Wormwood in C.S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters, "Indeed the safest road to hell is the gradual one, the gently slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

Remember, we have been saved by Christ to be on the side of the angels. God empower us to "do unto others as you would have them do it unto you." Maybe sometimes Jesus is bad for business and your self-interest, but he's always good for the human spirit.

Should we be overly concerned about demon possession? Probably not, but I wouldn't be surprised if the Devil wanted us to be because he doesn't necessarily need to possess you, he's just as satisfied to influence and tempt you to be less than you can be.

But then there's Christ, empowering you to be all you should be.

So who do you think is really good for business?