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✝ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

### **The Demon-Possessed Man**

Last week we heard about the man, who had many demons, whom Jesus healed.

When we first encountered the man, he is terrifying, dangerous, full of demons, outside his mind, naked; he lived among the tombs, was often chained, and often broke his chains to be driven into the wilderness. He's someone that none of us would have wanted to encounter. And yet, he's also someone who even in this state immediately goes to Jesus.

The townspeople, who have homes, beds, careers and livelihoods presumably, no demons, become terrified that this man has been liberated. They send Jesus away.

On the only point in the universe that matters, the people with homes, with careers, with sanity, with clothes, with no demons — fail. They send Jesus away. On the only point in the universe that ultimately matters, the man with no home, with no clothes, with demons *succeeds*. He gets into the presence of Jesus *immediately*.

And so, we asked this question: *Who was really in their right mind all along?* Who was really in their right mind — the man, or the townspeople? The man, of course, is *now* in his right mind, for Jesus has cast out the demons and healed this man; when we first encountered him, he *wasn't* in his right mind. But then again — when we peel back the layers and the disguises and all the filters of reality — isn't the *only* qualification for being in your right mind is that you *want* the presence of Jesus? Isn't that just what this man did — even though his mind and body were possessed? And this is the same thing the townspeople *refuse* to do — they refuse to enter the presence of Jesus. They send him away. So who was really in their right mind — the man or the townspeople?

By the end of the story, we are let in on what Jesus saw all along. The man *wanted* to be in the presence of Jesus. The townspeople wanted nothing to do with him. This story helps us see the world *through new* eyes, because it gives us a perspective that only Jesus can give — only he can see the world this way, until he reveals it to us. We realize, by the end of the story, that we would much rather be like the man, as strange and terrifying as he was, if that meant we would get into the presence of Jesus. We do not want to be like the townspeople, who send Jesus away.

### **The Samaritans**

This morning's passage continues this theme of *Who wants to be in the presence of Jesus?* The Samaritans, like the townspeople, do not want the presence of Jesus. They refuse his messengers; they refuse to receive him. James and John are so astounded by the Samaritan's refusal, that they ask Jesus if they should send fire down from heaven to destroy the Samaritans. (This is, perhaps, where they get their nickname, *Sons of Thunder*.) If we are a little surprised at this request, we should read 2 Kings 1, where we find that Elijah does exactly this — calls fire from heaven to destroy the 50 messengers from the King who have come to take his life. But the Samaritans do not seek to take Jesus' life, they categorically refuse to hear him because his face is set towards Jerusalem. They do not realize that Jesus is on his way to the Cross, to give up his life for Israel, for Judea, for Samaria, and for the world. The story is not over for the Samaritans; we will meet them again in the Book of Acts.

The Samaritans, for now, are like the townspeople of last week; they refuse the presence of Jesus. But what of the three men whom we heard about? Who will these three men be like — the demon-possessed man or the townspeople?

### **Teaser**

For all those who want this congregation to grow — either *in terms of numbers* or *in terms of the heart* — listen in.

The words we heard from Jesus are not the words of someone who believes all he needs to do is to get the men around himself, and then the rest will fall into place. If only the men would join his outer circle, they would remain. We may be tempted to think this way — if only we could get people *in* the church, then people would *remain* in the church. But is that really the case? Is this what the Scriptures reveal? Is this how the Holy Spirit works?

The words which Jesus gives to these three men are demanding, absolute, and reveal that Jesus is looking for disciples who are fully onboard and committed to his mission. What we see in his exchanges with these three men is *how* Jesus recruits disciples. This might be surprising, and it might not look like it, but Jesus is actively recruiting. We know that Jesus is recruiting, because of what comes immediately after this passage — Jesus sends out 72 *other* disciples — 72 disciples in addition to the twelve. And — that is our passage for next week. So how does the recruitment of these three men go?

Remember, the demon-possessed man *begged* to be one of Jesus' disciples, begged to go with him, wanted nothing other than to follow Jesus. But Jesus sent him back to his town, to proclaim the good news there. Do these three men have this same desire, this same commitment? Or, will these men reveal that their commitment is a matter of preference and convenience?

### **Three More Disciples?**

Three men appear to be ready to follow Jesus. Are they?

The first man appears eager. He calls to Jesus: "I will follow you wherever you go." Notice Jesus' response; he does not respond with enthusiasm or with encouragement to this man. He does not say, "Yes — you can do it!" Instead, Jesus warns him: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus knows all things, and we can infer that Jesus is warning this man — and the others — where it counts, where it matters. Perhaps this man loves his rest or his bed or his home. Jesus has no bed and no home. What will the man do? We do not hear what the man does.

Jesus turns his attention to a second man, and speaks to him: "Follow me." The man hesitates: "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." This seems a reasonable request, but Jesus does not treat it that way: "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Here is a strange paradox: the dead are already dead, but the living need life. Who will tell the living about this everlasting life? Jesus sends this man to proclaim life — the kingdom of God. Does the man go and proclaim the kingdom? We do not find out.

The third man begins with a condition, a prerequisite, for following Jesus: "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Again, a reasonable request. And, this is the same request Elisha asks of Elijah. Elisha returns to his field, sets the plow on fire, and barbecues the twelve oxen. Elisha's goodbye to his family and his previous livelihood is final. There is no work to return to. He will be Elijah's assistant going forward. But what about *this* man, the one says he wants to follow Jesus, if he is allowed to say goodbye? What does this man do? Does he leave his family behind? Does he follow Jesus? We do not find out.

We do not know what became of any of the three of these men. We know that Jesus was successful in recruiting men, because he sends out 72 additional disciples. We can't say that Jesus said the wrong thing, because Jesus knows all things and said what was true and best and good to each of these men. What Jesus told the men is what each needed to hear; he told them what would keep them from following him, what would keep them from being singularly committed to his ministry and mission. The first man is tempted by *comfort*; the second man with *responsibility*; and the third man with *relationships*.

We would do well, of course, to reflect what comforts, what responsibilities, what relationships keep us from singularly prioritizing Jesus as Lord. It is the fact that Jesus is Lord that he can say such things and that he can make such demands of people — indeed, he has made his absolutizing, total demand on all of us. "Take up your cross and follow me." He is our Lord.

We would also do well to note how unapologetically demanding Jesus is on these three men. The fact that Luke does not record the outcome tells us that these demands need no qualification. Jesus does not call after them, saying, “No, don’t worry, I’ll make sure you have a good bed each night.” or, “No, please leave and go bury your father” or, “Of course you can go say goodbye to your family. I was just using hyperbole. I’ll see you in a few days.”

There is nothing more incredible, more meaningful, more worthy, or more life-saving that any of these three men could do other than joining Jesus and sharing in his ministry. Remember the demon-possessed man and the townspeople. Nothing is greater than being in the presence of Jesus. Our namesake, Emmanuel, *God With Us*, is the highest good and highest goal and highest purpose of mankind. There God is, inviting these three men to join him in his ministry. There God is, inviting these three men to join him as he makes his way to Jerusalem, to the cross, to his death.

These men are invited to receive a share of his ministry and to bear witness to his death. There’s no time for anything else for these three men, or for the Samaritans. The cross, for Jesus, is ever nearer in view. Day by day, the cross is clearer, nearer, closer. Which of these men will join him in ministry? Which of these three men will be among those who yell, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”?

### **Watering Down**

Discipleship is complete, all-encompassing. Jesus does not rearrange, reorder, or redesign his ministry to accommodate people who will not be followers on *his* terms. He tells them his demands, and then he continues on in his mission.

There is fruit here for discipleship and for evangelism. We know, innately, that we cannot accommodate the gospel message of *Christ crucified for your life* without compromising Christianity. Once we give up that message, we have given up Christianity. We have become something else. We have forsaken Christ as Lord.

A huge danger that shows up in the Church, that we can disavow based on how Jesus calls these disciples is the danger of seeing the gospel as a product to be marketed.

The Church is always and ever tempted to market Christianity as a product to the world. The Church is always tempted to find product-market fit for the gospel. This Church will be tempted in this way, especially as we bury more Christians here. How will we get people in the door? How will we keep them here? Using this kind of language helps make it clear that *this way* of doing Church, of sharing the gospel, is not right or good. The world is not a market; the gospel is not a product.

Should we arrange Church — the liturgy, the preaching, the music, the prayers — for attracting *new* believers, or for *fortifying* believers? I’m afraid this is a bit of a trick question — neither. We should arrange it *for* the glory of God *from* what God has first given us. The liturgy, communion, the preaching, the music, the prayers — in these things we use what God has given us, to offer up worship back to him. The liturgy is ordered around what we have received from God through the Church — God’s Word, God’s Presence, God’s Communion, God’s Peace; the preaching is to make known the full counsel of God; the music is for praising God, especially through the words of Scripture; the prayers are for us to participate in what God is doing on earth, that his will may be done — come what may.

If we were to try to find product-market fit for the gospel, we would always — especially unintentionally! — be watering down the gospel, watering down the fullness of the good news, watering down the demands that Jesus places on his followers. Because we would always be seeking to increase the numbers of those who would fit our product.

A clear example and temptation of this has been: What should the Church teach about sex and how? Sex, from the beginning, from Creation, from Genesis 2 has been for the people of God. The whole Old Testament taught about sex and idolatry. Jesus continued to teach about it, and made the demands even sharper — “If anyone

lusts, *that* is adultery!” The rest of the New Testament teaches about sex, too. Always there is a clear rejection of sexual immorality for the people of God. But — to what extent are we going to be tempted to censor ourselves for the sake of culture, for the sake of those who may not like what the Church has to say? Will we hold the line against sodomy and pornography and adultery? We had better.

We must not give in to the lies of culture, who say that such things belong only to *personal lives* or to *politics*. Again, the entire Scripture refutes this — we must, as the people of God, have fidelity towards God and towards each other. What we believe and how we live *matters*.

One more example of watering down our faith. Another of the lies of culture that I believed until *very* recently, and that you have likely heard before, is this — “You don’t need to like people, you just need to love them.” I believed this lie. No, what it means to love someone is to *also* like them. None of us believes that Jesus loves us but doesn’t really like having us around. None of us believes that Jesus forgives the worst among us, and then is annoyed that he has forgiven them and kept them around. So, too, we must love and forgive each other in this way.

If the world doesn’t want we have — if the world does not want to hear the gospel, believe Jesus, and grow in faith and fruitfulness — then that is a problem with the world, not with the church. But if the church is mimicking the world, the culture, and the world does not want it, then that is a problem with the church, for the church has simply become the world.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This passage exposes some of the assumptions we may have about Jesus, about the church, and about those who are on the fringes of following him. Jesus places demands on his followers. So, too, we should not be shy about teaching and preaching and believing the full counsel of God. For this is the type of follower and worshipper God seeks.

Is the Church a business and is what we are doing *marketing* for a product? Or is the Church the body and bride of Christ that holds up the cup of salvation?

Our concern is for souls — the souls of those in this congregation, and the souls of the people we actually know, and then the souls of those whom we encounter in our lives.

That’s where we begin — praying for the people we already know and love, that they would come to faith in Jesus. And we continue *in faith* by talking to these people whom we already know and love about what we believe, especially when clear opportunities are presented for us to do so.

We do not want to be half-hearted believers; neither should we encourage half-hearted Christianity in others. Jesus is our Lord, and as such, he makes demands on us, and his demands are good for us. Let us follow our Lord together for life — come what may.

✠ All Glory be to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.