



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Restored”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: Mark 5:1-20

August 23, 2009

Nine days ago, when I opened the newspaper and saw that the Philadelphia Eagles had signed convicted dog torturer Michael Vick, I had a visceral reaction. I felt nauseated and wondered: How could they do that? This is a team that, for the last few years, has boasted of signing only players with stellar character. Had they lost their minds or had they simply tossed aside any pretense that they seek a higher standard than the other NFL teams?

Was the Eagles decision to sign Vick a striking example that the chief value in our society truly is the bottom line? Is it one more example that in our secular culture, moral considerations have become passé? The only thing that really counts is what you can really *count*.

Michael Vick has engaged in despicable behavior. Promoting dog fighting and killing innocent animals because they are not viscous enough is about as morally repulsive as I can imagine. He has been convicted of crimes that make him, in many eyes, an out of control social misfit who has demonstrated that he cannot live in a civilized society. Cruelty to animals demonstrates not only a sadistic character, but a deranged soul. Vick came to mind as I read this story from the Gospel of Mark about a man who was filled with demons.

Today’s passage tells of an occasion when Jesus and his disciples crossed to the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee. They departed Jewish territory and stepped onto Gentile soil. In case we have limited geographical knowledge, Mark provides us with details that underscore his point that Jesus has entered an alien and unclean land. Good Jewish rabbis avoided cemeteries and pigs because these things made them ritually unclean. However, Jesus cast aside precaution and marched directly into this polluted place. Why?

The story tells us that as soon as Jesus steps out of the boat, a madman confronts him. The tormented man is possessed by an evil spirit, but we quickly learn that this is no ordinary gospel story about demon possession. This man has become someone on the order of a werewolf. The townspeople have attempted to restrain him with chains and shackles, but to no avail. The man has wrenched apart the chains and shattered the shackles. The gospel writer says, “Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling.” This was someone deeply disturbed in mind and soul who abused himself with stones.

Mark provides more than the usual detail in this story to emphasize that this was a desperate situation. One scholar writes, “The man is totally out of control and incapable of living within society. Symbolic of his expulsion from human fellowship, he lives beyond the

boundaries of civilization...among the dead.”¹ This man’s behavior has become so terrifying, that he has been driven out of the community.

When Jesus comes near, the man runs up to Jesus and does not simply speak to him, but screams at the top of his lungs, “What are you going to do to me?” Jesus sees that the man is possessed by an evil spirit and asks, “What is your name?” And the dark spirits within the man reply, “My name is Legion; for we are many.”

“Many” is an understatement. The word ‘legion,’ borrowed from Latin, refers to an army unit of four to six thousand troops. The gospel writer is employing hyperbole to describe a man who is filled with demons.

Then, in the midst of this dramatic story, Mark tosses in a bit of humor. To 21st century Christians it may seem a bizarre detail, but to Mark’s original audience, who were Jewish Christians, it was a delightful anecdote. From early in their history, the Hebrew people were forbidden to eat pigs. And over time, swine became a symbol for everything that was unclean. So we can imagine that the cheers went up when Mark told his original audience that Jesus had not simply exorcised the demons from this man, but he had sent them into an enormous herd of pigs standing nearby. The pigs, now crazed by this infusion of demons, immediately rushed into the sea and drowned. And once all those dirty swine met their demise, the man was healed. Hooray!

Incredulous at what they had seen, those who had been herding the pigs high-tail it into town to tell everyone what has happened, and the townspeople come out to size up the situation. When they arrive, they find the man who had been possessed by demons, sitting there and in his right mind.

We need to pay close attention to how the people react. Do they celebrate the man’s healing? Do they throw their arms around him and rejoice with him in his newfound existence? Do they hoist him onto their shoulders and parade back into town? Do they string a banner across the city gate that reads: “Welcome Back”? The text says that they were afraid and they immediately told Jesus to get out of their neighborhood.

Why such a negative reaction to the man’s healing? Some say the dramatic display of power may have frightened the people. Others say that those grubby Gentiles were primarily interested in making a profit and Jesus had just cost the pig owner a bundle. However, Markan scholar Donald Juel, points out that this “story recapitulates a familiar theme in Mark: the restoration of an outsider to life within the community, which those in charge of maintaining the boundaries, find upsetting.”²

During Jesus’ time, lepers were banned from the community and forced to live outside the city limits. To touch such a person was to render yourself unclean. Jesus did not care. He healed lepers, which allowed them to rejoin society. Jesus did not keep the prescribed distance away from a woman who was bleeding or a little girl who was dead. He healed the woman and took the child by the hand. He shared meals with sinners and tax collectors. The religious authorities became furious with Jesus because he deliberately sabotaged their rules and wrecked their boundaries. Jesus was intent on cleansing and healing, and restoring people to their communities.

If you are the person who is restored, if you are the one who had been banished but now has been given a second chance, you want to thank Jesus for the new life. But if you are the townspeople, who have a place outside of town for misfits and want them to stay there, then Jesus is a scary figure.

Jesus possessed an extraordinary capability of looking deeply into people. He could see in people – even the sinners, the prostitutes and the demon possessed – that they were created in God’s image. The abuses by parents, the mutations of genes, the years of mistreatment, all of these piled on multiple layers that covered up a person’s core, but Jesus could see through all the layers and spot a person of worth. He believed that a dangerous outsider could be purged of his demons so that he could rejoin society.

So what about Michael Vick? Is he a modern day stand-in for this demon-possessed man in Mark’s gospel? He certainly fits the bill as a pariah and his internal demons prompted him to display a remarkable degree of cruelty and a total disregard for common decency. It’s easy to understand why people are outraged that the Eagles signed him to a contract and would like to keep him away from their city.

Have the Eagles sold their soul in hopes of winning a Super Bowl or have they given someone a second chance to prove that he can be a positive force in people’s lives? My cynical side cautions me to be skeptical of the Eagles’ motives. My cynical side questions whether a person can make such dramatic changes in behavior. But I also know that if I wade too far into the quicksand of cynicism, I may never be able to free myself from its grip.

Has Michael Vick been transformed? I have no idea. But, I know we cannot ignore someone’s past behavior because it provides strong clues to future behavior. If a man has abused children in the past, he might do it again. If he says, “I made a mistake. I’m sorry, I’ll never do that again.” We don’t say, “Well, he’s put that behind him, I think we should go ahead and let him teach our five and six year-olds.”

On the other hand, if the Christian faith stands for anything, it stands for transformation. At the core of what it means to follow Christ is dying to a past way of living and becoming a new creation. That doesn’t mean we must hand Vick the keys to the Humane Society, but it does mean people can change and sometimes we have to risk giving them a second chance. He could become a powerful witness to poor, urban youth, or anyone who believes it’s macho to mistreat animals.

Gracie Allen, the comedian who teamed with her husband, George Burns, and got laughs by acting either ignorant or naïve, but she also delivered some zingers that struck the truth. She once said, “Never put a period where God has put a comma.”

God can restore people who have made a terrible mess of their lives. God can heal people that we’ve given up on. God can forgive people whom we deem unforgiveable. God can take people that we have thrown away and give them a second shot at getting it right.

Hope is based on the belief that change is possible. If we have done something to alienate others – and who among us has not had thoughts that were racist or homophobic or spiteful or greedy – don’t we cling to the hope that a new beginning, a fresh start is genuinely possible?

James Autry is a corporate CEO, a poet, and the son of a pastor who writes about religion in the rural South. Listen to James Autry’s poem about a country baptism in the river:

There’s something about this,
about putting the people under the water
and raising them up in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
something that makes the people cry,
that makes them want everything to be all right,
and makes them want to leave this place and be better,

to immerse themselves in their lives
and somehow be washed clean
of all the things they think
they should not have done
and should not still want to do.
That's it.
Not the other stuff,
the star in the east,
the treasures in heaven,
or any of the old stories.
Not even life after death.
It is only to be new again.³

That's what keeps us going. The belief that God continually provides opportunities for us to be new again.

NOTES

1. Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprises: Mark Interpreted*, (Mifflington, PA: Sigler Press, 2002), p. 66.
2. Ibid.
3. James A. Autry, "Baptism," in *Life After Mississippi* (Yoknapatawpha Press, 1989).