



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SET FREE TO LOVE”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61; Luke 8:26-39

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 17, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 8:26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me’— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He said, ‘Legion’; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

I have heard it said that in some places in Africa, it is not unusual to find a full grown elephant tied to a small tree with a simple rope. Now, these full grown elephants – they are enormous,

weighing in upwards of 12 tons and standing taller than a basketball goal, and while these behemoths are capable of uprooting large trees with their trunks and can even knock down houses without much trouble, it happens that a tiny single rope manages to keep them in their place.

Apparently, when certain elephants are young, and when they do not yet possess the immense power that they will one day have as adults, the owner of the elephant - in order to keep the calf from roaming here and there - will tie it to a tree with a rope. At an early age, even an elephant lacks the strength to break themselves loose; and so, what eventually happens is this: after many failed attempts, the young elephant just gives up...and it does this throughout its whole life.

It shouldn't come as much of a surprise to hear that an elephant could just give up like that, because, at some level, we all do much the same thing...we allow ourselves to be held captive by things that shouldn't have any power over us whatsoever.

Has anyone ever said to you in so many words, "You'll never amount to anything?" or "You're not worthy?" or "You might as well not even try because nothing that you do will ever make a difference?"

Oh, if we hear those words enough...and when no amount of effort on our part ever seems to change our circumstances...and when everything in our experience seems to suggest that nothing can be done...we start believing it. We start believing in our inability to resist life's temptations; we start believing that our addiction will forever define who we are; we start believing that based upon past and failed relationships that we are somehow forever destined to be alone....and we give up...we just stop trying to free ourselves!

But friends, when we believe like that, we are essentially allowing ourselves to be held hostage by a captor whose power is made real in no other place save our minds. And here's another thing...sometimes it's not the thin rope that we can see which we need to rightly perceive for what it is and for what it is not...sometimes we can't see it at all. Sometimes we grow so accustomed to the rope that we don't even know it is there. I can think of few sadder sights in the whole of creation than a child of God not even knowing to try for something better.

This is one of the benefits of the Season of Lent, for it is for us a time when we recall anew the limits of our understanding and the frailty of the human condition. We are invited to think deeply about the nature of sin and of the stirring call of God to repentance; and in doing so, we are invited to live into a better reality, one where we are no longer bound to a past that we cannot change, but rather opened to a future in which we can actually be changed – a future

where we become spiritually mature, and see with eyes of faith and know in our hearts and minds the promises of God!

And what I am saying is nothing that the Bible has not already said. In Isaiah 61, the very scroll from which Jesus would one day read while in his home synagogue, it reminds us that God is continually about the business of transforming life – it makes clear to all who would listen that it is in the nature of God “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners....”

And this doesn't mean that the past never happened or that we don't have to deal with the consequences of our actions, but it does mean that they were never intended to define who we are; they were never intended to have the last word; because, you see, when faced with the fullness and the freedom of Christ into which we are called to live, those past constraints, whatever they may be, in the end, they have about as much power over us as a thin rope attached to a flimsy tree.

I find myself coming back to some of my favorite Biblical heroes and how even their lives, at certain moments, seemed to be forever linked to their poor choices...their worst decisions. I think about King David and how he sent Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to the front lines of battle in order that Uriah would be killed so that he, the King, could then marry Bathsheba. Or I think about the disciple, Peter, and how, near the end of Jesus' earthly life, Peter denied three times that he was one of Jesus' followers. I think about the woman at the well and how she had been so enslaved to sin that she had had not one but five husbands, and the man she was with when she met Jesus wasn't her husband.

Oh, if any of those people – or countless others, for that matter – if any of them had just given up - had they resigned themselves solely to their past experiences - they would have never been able to live into God's promised future. They would have never experienced the life of joy which God intends for all of his children, that life of faith wherein our sister at the well could come to know and share with others something about the very personification of forgiveness; that life in which Peter could later, and not so incidentally three times over, profess his faith in God; that life wherein King David could become more fully that man who could seek after God's own heart.

This morning we read about another individual, and this one has come to be known by us as the Gerasene demoniac, and this man was forever tormented. He lived his life away from people...lived in the tombs, of all places. It turns out that his own demons would not let him go. And what a spectacular sight that must have been...to have witnessed his demons sent into a herd of swine, watching them run off a cliff and drown in the Sea of Galilee.

Yet what an even more grander sight it must have been to see that same man, seated at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, tethered now, not to demons - not to chains that break - but to the words of Jesus.

There is a lesson here for all of us...and it not only has to do with Jesus' ability to illuminate the darkness of our life, revealing to us the chains which have prevented us from living boldly into God's future, but there is also revealed to us a complimentary and quite necessary aspect to any life of discipleship and it is this: we are called to be rooted and grounded in God, or to put it another way, we are never more free than when we are bound to Christ!

But wait a minute...we've spent the whole sermon up until now reflecting upon how we are not bound to certain things...and that's right – but there are those ties which are blessed by God, namely that sacred union between Christ and his body, the Church...his children.

In Romans chapter 6 we read: "But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification." I'm afraid that far too many Christians these days have forgotten that the freedom we have to be in Christ is a freedom we have to actually be "in" Christ, and to be rooted in God – and nourished and sanctified by the spirit!

And for us, this is an opportunity – an opportunity to yield, not to our past, but to Christ...to actually be bound to our Savior...to be freed from whatever rope that has held us captive in the past and to sit and listen at the feet of the master. There is no denying that the past will always be a part of who we are, and we can undoubtedly learn from the past...but we are not bound to it! Our future is shaped far more by God than it is by us. And what does God say about our future?

Well, listen to these words from the prophet Jeremiah: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). And, praise be to God, that future is realized most fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ about whom it has also been said..."If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

That is our spiritual heritage; that we are free to love God and neighbor and to have life and have it abundantly, and that is a future we can celebrate:

* it is a future where the thoughts of what we have done or left undone serve to inspire us rather than betray us with their regret;

* it is future in which, by God's grace, we can snap all the ropes which hold us back, taking away that power which was not theirs to begin with;

*indeed, ours is a future in which our life and our life lived together can be a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that the world need not resign itself to the status quo, mistakenly presuming that nothing can be done – that no amount of effort can make a difference because it can and does!

And it starts with our unity in Christ, those ties which bind us together; for that is what allows us collectively to become a veritable chain of witnesses – beneficial and life-giving, and those are the kinds of chains we can live with, dear friends, because they are the ones that actually set us free! In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*