

“How Much God Has Done”

The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him (Luke 8:38-39).

On June 4, 1783, in the square of a French village not far from Paris, a smoky bonfire on a raised platform was fed by wet straw and old wool rags. Tethered above the fire, straining its lines, was a huge taffeta bag 33 feet in diameter. In the presence of a large crowd and accompanied by great cheering, the balloon was cut from its moorings and set free to rise majestically into the afternoon sky, floating six thousand feet into the air. This historic event was the first public ascent of a balloon and the first step in the history of human flight. After its short journey, the balloon came to earth several miles away in a field, where it was promptly attacked by pitchfork-waving peasants and torn to pieces as an instrument of evil!

In today's Gospel reading we find a similar scene. A miracle had occurred. A community had been delivered from a long-standing public menace. A man possessed by demons had been healed in an amazing display of power. You would expect that Jesus would have been met with cheers and shouts of joy. But that's not what happened. Luke writes that when, "Those who had seen (the miracle) told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured...all the people of the region asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear" (Luke 8:36-37).

This story from the life of Jesus teaches us many things. First, it shows that Jesus' mission of love and forgiveness was a mission to all people. We see this in the setting of the story as Jesus travels to a pagan region outside of his Jewish homeland; a fact that's illustrated by the herd of pigs which were considered unclean animals and would have never been kept by any self-respecting Jewish family. Another important teaching found in this reading is the revelation of Jesus' true identity; that Jesus is God Himself in the flesh; a fact that is spelled out by the demons themselves as they greet Jesus with the title "Son of the Most High God." These are critical aspects of the story, but another key element, and one of the most important things this story has to say to us, is the truth that we are natural enemies of God.

In our story we see a reaction from the people that seems completely contrary to the miracle they had witnessed, and yet that is exactly what we do in the face of God's work in our lives. We would much rather be independent and self-reliant, than give any real control over to God, and instead of submitting to God's Word and the work of the Spirit in our lives, we react like the people in our reading – we resist and we reject. Our rejection of God can take many forms and make itself known in a variety of ways. Sometimes it shows itself in very outward ways like we see in the demons or the crowd we find in our reading. Other times our rejection of God is much more subtle and well-mannered, but just as dangerous and damaging.

Baptist preacher and writer Gordon Atkinson tells the story of a couple who approached him about their wedding. The couple wasn't Christian, yet they wanted a pastor to perform their ceremony. In recalling their conversation Atkinson writes, "They hoped to capture the classic beauty of the Christian ceremony without the bother of Christianity. They wanted the delicious English (vows) from the Book of Common Prayer, but they didn't want the Word behind the words...They were looking for someone to roll out the tradition...stretch it and pull it and slide it around on the table. They wanted to cut it into swatches and see if it matched the bridesmaid's dresses. They needed a preacher in a robe who would deliver the goods with a wink and a smile, then go away and not bother anyone." At one point in their meeting, Atkinson writes, "They actually said to me, 'We want a nice wedding and all. You know, classic. But can you tone down the God and Jesus stuff?'"

The Baptist preacher concludes his story by saying, "I tried to be nice in my refusal. 'I'm sorry' I said, 'I can't do what you're asking. I can't take God out of the wedding service. It would be a betrayal of my calling. I'm not the minister you're looking for.'" Atkinson continued, "What they did next was the most disturbing thing of all...It was more depressing than when they asked me to 'de-God' the service. They huddled for a second, whispering to each other. Then they nodded, apparently coming to a decision. The man spoke for the two of them. 'That's cool' he said...'You can leave all that stuff in. Do the service however you like. We're fine either way. It's all good.'" (Gordon Atkinson, RealLivePreacher.com, 121-123).

Our rejection of God may not be this blatant, but in our own way, we have all rejected God and chosen the path of independence. We've all compartmentalized our relationship to our Creator, pulling Him out only when it seems necessary or convenient. For some of us our independence from God shows itself in a preoccupation and reliance on wealth. For others of us we protect our independence by disregarding or ignoring of the needs of those around us. For others, our rejection and independence is as open and shameless as the couple in the story. The truth is that no matter how we may package it, we have all gone our own way, and like the people in our reading we have turned our backs on Christ. We have rejected God!

In the fearful rejection of the people in our reading we see ourselves; yet even in our state of rejection, God has pursued us! In today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah God says, "I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me" (Isaiah 65). You see, our rejection of God isn't a surprise to Him. God knew how He would be received and yet even with that knowledge God sent His Son into the world. And with that knowledge Jesus put our sins on His back and carried them to the cross. With the knowledge of our complete rejection of Him, He took up our self-centeredness, and our fear, and our well-mannered independence. These sins – our sins – sentenced Jesus to death, and there on the cross, God punished Jesus for the sins we have committed and in return gave to us the righteousness and innocence of the sinless Son of God.

Through Jesus Christ, our relationship to God has been radically changed. God has found us, even when we did not seek Him, and He has shattered our fatal independence and connected us to Himself through the blood of Christ. We are dependent on God, not because we sought Him out, but because He came to us when we were powerless and He has given everything. God has forgiven us, God has given us life, and He has even given us the ability to believe, in fact without God's work in our lives, faith would be impossible for us.

A man once visited his doctor for a physical examination. After the exam the doctor turned to his patient and in a stern tone said, "You are in terrible shape. You've got to make some changes. First, tell your wife to cook more nutritious meals. Stop working like a dog. Also, inform your wife you're going to make a budget, and she has to stick to it. And have her keep the kids off your back so you can relax. Unless there are some changes like that in your life, you'll probably be dead in a month."

"Doctor," the patient said, "this would sound more official coming from you. Could you please call my wife and give her those instructions?"

When the man got home, his wife met him at the door. "I talked to your doctor," she wailed. "You poor man, he said you've only got thirty days to live."

Like the wife in the story, we simply can't do the things required of us. Martin Luther made this point in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed when he wrote, "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts and sanctified and kept me in the one true faith."

No one could have understood Luther's words more than demon-possessed man Jesus healed. A man who had been cut off from his family and his community; a man whose demons had driven him to a solitary place; a man who was completely helpless to change; this man was cleansed of his sin and given a new life, and his reaction was to fall at the feet of Jesus in thanksgiving and praise. In New Testament times to sit at someone's feet was a sign of submission and dependence, and after this man had been saved he gladly took this position in response to just how much God had done for him

The healing of the demon-possessed man gives us a picture of the love God has for humankind. In this story, Jesus goes into a hostile land and brings healing and forgiveness to a man who was as far from God as you could possibly be. That is exactly what He has done for us and like the man Jesus had delivered from demons, we also have the power and ability to return home and tell how much God has done for us. The forgiveness of Christ changes our relationship to God forever and this is a message worth sharing! Amen.

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