
The Cost of Healing

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 23, 2013 by the Rev. Luke Powery

It's not everyday at Duke that you come across a naked demon-possessed man living in the tombs or in the chapel crypt. Some may call divinity schools and seminaries cemeteries but this is no gothic graveyard and I'm very grateful that I don't have to preach in front of a bunch of naked people (thank the Lord). But Jesus does not seem to be disturbed or afraid of this man, with or without clothes. Actually, he attracts these kinds of people to himself—not the people who seem to have it together, but those whose lives may be torn apart. The first person he meets when he reaches “the other side of the lake,” is the demoniac. It was Jesus's choice to go to the other side in the boat and by doing so he knows that he's crossing boundaries—geographical, ethnic, and religious. He was entering foreign territory, the borderlands, the other side of the religious tracks; yet the scene is familiar because it is another storm and he knows how to handle those.

Just before this story, Jesus silences the storm on the lake and brings calm to the wind and waves and now he's about to silence the demonic storm in the life of the Gerasene man. Jesus demonstrates power over natural forces, demonic forces and even over death itself as he heals Jairus' daughter who was dead after he leaves the Gerasenes. Jesus is an equal opportunity God for anyone stuck in a storm. He's used to storms and he can calm them. He is, as early church father, Tertullian says, an “exterminator of spiritual foes.” Jesus meets some foes in the form of demons that wrecked this man's life. He gets down and dirty to do his exorcist ministry. He enters what might have been considered a domain of death. In this scene, as one commentator writes: “nothing ... is kosher; everything is unclean: the spirit(s), the tombs, the pigs, the territory”(Lamar Williamson). This is not summer cottage country. Jesus risks contamination for the life of this one man.

A storm rages in his life. He lives in the tombs; he's a dead man walking, possessed by demons that drive him into the wilds. He's a wild thing who breaks physical chains but cannot break the chains in his own life. His demonic problems are legion, huge, and perhaps as large as a Roman army of four to six thousand soldiers. Yet in a moment of lucidity, this demoniac answers what the disciples on the boat could not answer. The disciples asked, “Who is this?” And surprisingly, the demoniac gives the right answer—“Jesus, Son of the Most High God.” This naked, homeless, dead, foreign, outsider, the one with DPP (demon possessed personality) sees clearly who Jesus is unlike his disciples. Yet, he's unable to recognize his own sickness; he thought everyone wore chains and shackles as an en vogue fashion statement. Ironically, he begs Jesus not to torment him when in fact he's already tormented! He knew no other reality but tragedy. His demonic storm was his norm so much so that he didn't want to be free or know what freedom is.

But Jesus gets his name to gain control over him and casts out the unclean spirit. The man is freed from his internal chains and is found “clothed and in his right mind” sitting at the feet of Jesus. “The one who had been possessed by demons had been healed” or it can be translated “saved.” This man is healed of demon possession and saved from destruction. He's freed to rejoin the community of humanity and enter into his new vocation. Gracious healing had occurred so one might think that there would be a “holy hip hop hooray healing party” for this man. However, we do not find “unanimous joy.” “The Gerasene people are not praising God that a man is healed; they are counting the cost and find it too much”(Fred Craddock). What we discover here is that there are costs associated with healing.

Jessica Yang knew this as an 11th grader when she wrote a reflection called “The Cost of Healing.” In her own words, “Ever since elementary school, I have dreamed of becoming a doctor - I wanted to cure illness and make people feel better. My dream job was specifically to be a pediatrician, because I thought getting to talk with kids and to work with their parents would be fun and really cool, *and* I would be helping them. Now as a high school student thinking practically about my college and future career goals, I wonder whether I will be able to realize this dream.” She questions her dream because of the cost of higher education—college and medical

school—and the loan debt many face and the difficulty in trying to pay off those loans at times. She concludes with talking about the many adults and children who do not even have health insurance.

And we all have heard the debates about the astronomical costs of healthcare, even in a recent New York Times article about the “cost of cancer” treatment based on research of a Duke faculty member. There is a cost associated with healing. In the ecclesial realm, some ministers have taken that literally to mean that one should sow a financial seed to receive the physical blessing of healing. Jam-packed stadiums for miracle crusades, but at what cost? \$19.99 for a prayer cloth with some holy oil on it? There is a price tag put on healing many times and one must wonder if a moneymaking scheme in the name of God is in disguise, particularly preying on the vulnerable. The demoniac did not pay nor did he ask for healing. But Jesus healed him. In his case, healing was free financially. Yet there are clear costs as well.

The healed man put on clothes. He’s in his right mind. This is good news for him. He has a new lease on life but good news for some may be bad news for others. The “demons came out of the man but entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.” The swine, the pigs, were viewed as unclean therefore suitable hosts for evil spirits. Demons do what demons do—they kill. The possessed pigs lead to suicidal swine. The man is blessed through healing but this is not a blessing of the animals at Duke Chapel. It seems more like a torment of creation that would anger any animal rights group. Moreover, the loss of the animals means an economic loss for the swineherds. A liberating theology as revealed in the healing of the demoniac may be bad economy for someone else, especially if economic growth is based on keeping you sick. The swineherds lost their herds and livelihood. With the plunge of the pigs into the lake, their livelihood went down the drain as well. One storm had stopped but it started another one in the life of the swineherds. A healing of one man caused hurt to another. This is the *aporia* of life. There was a cost of healing that no one could really predict.

And who could predict what would happen to this healed man? A demon-possessed man turned into a disciple; that means there’s hope for us. At first, he begged Jesus not to torment him but then eventually begged Jesus that he might be with him. But Jesus is not satisfied with this man just being in his presence. Jesus calls him to action. This whole person, healed and saved, was given a responsibility to proclaim “how much God had done” for him. Jesus calls him to home missions and makes him an itinerant preacher throughout the city. His healing caused a vocational shift in his life. No longer was he shackled by demonic slavery among the dead. Now he was freed and sent to preach among the living. A life of contemplation post-healing at the feet of Jesus was insufficient. Activism was also necessary. His healing cost him his life because with the healing came the cost of discipleship. As a disciple his response was one of obedience to the call of Jesus. He could not be satisfied with receiving healing and doing nothing in response but sit at the feet of Jesus. His healing propelled him into ministry for Jesus. He was called to serve. He was called to do mission. He was now enrolled in service to Jesus. We may think that being possessed by a demon was costly but his healing cost him too. He had to give up his life in service to Christ. His healing, his salvation, empowered him to do new things. Things that no one at home thought he would ever do like preaching the gospel. What really happened to this man was that God made him a new creation. And it is this new creation, this new reality created by a healing, that may be the highest cost.

A new creation suggests that something has changed. The old has passed away and the new has come. When God is in our midst, we shouldn’t expect things to stay the same. God is *Creator Spiritus*, a creative spirit, and is always creating something new. The cost of healing is that something changes not just for the healed person but also for the whole community. And the change that occurs may cause fear. When the people saw the man from whom demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, “they were afraid.” And when others hear about this healing, they are “seized with great fear.” Healing creates fear because sickness had always been the norm. When the chaos ceases and calm comes and healing arrives, then there is fear. People are afraid of the calm, not the storm, just like after the calming of the wind and waves. The storm was the norm in this city. They were used to a demon-possessed, naked, homeless, shackled man in their midst. They didn’t fear that because it was normal. They feared the calm healing and a man freed from his bondage because sometimes

it's more comfortable to imprison those we fear rather than see them dancing free. As Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm writes, "It [was] easier to accept the presence of a crazy person outside the boundaries of town than a healed man who will walk among them, confronting them with the reality of God's transforming power in their midst." They fear the unrecognizable calm because chaos was commonplace. Healing was abnormal and they didn't know how to interact with this man anymore because he was different. He was made new. He had changed and not everyone can handle change. Healing will cause a change and ironically, a dis-ease.

It may cause fear of the unknown and uncertainty, perhaps of how long the healing will last because we always expect the worst. One may be afraid of the calm before the next possible storm as one anticipates the storm to return because that is what one has known for the majority of one's life. Sickness, not healing. So the healing, the calm, comes with a cost—a fear of this new reality. Furthermore, facing the calm, in the stillness, there may be fear because we have to face our own reality and need. When faced with calm and healing, maybe we have to face our own chaos and sickness and need for healing and wholeness, our own psychological distortions in which chaos is the norm and the deadly diet of trouble is what we feed on. And when the storm is over, when the quiet comes, when the demons stop making noise and running wild, we then have to face our own demons perhaps. Those same demons that would ask the healer, Jesus, to leave their presence when he's the very one who can really save or heal. His presence reveals that we may be the ones possessed by sick spirits. Just as the unclean spirit had "seized" the man, the people were "seized with great fear" implying that the people may be possessed as well. But this only becomes clear in the presence of Christ, the healer, and his healing power. In his presence we may see ourselves for who we really are which is why we want him to leave. Without his calm healing, we can still hide behind the normal chaos.

But in the presence of the healer and healing, reality is re-ordered. Sure there is fear because power that cannot be managed is frightening and the power of God disturbs the way of life that had been accepted by the people. The community learned how to live with evil and demonic forces but through the healing, the world as they knew it was reordered and disrupted. They ask Jesus to leave because they are upset that things won't stay the same in the presence of Christ; he alters reality. His presence is too costly. That's what healing does—it reminds us that God will not leave things the way they are or à la Sam Cooke "A change is gonna come." But the people can't handle this new reality, this new creation, and the changes that have been made to the man because it also impacts them. Healing has made them lose a sense of order while God re-orders their disorder. In the presence of Christ, we may recognize the ways in which we are not well. The truth is costly. We may be so sick that we may ask the healer, Jesus, to leave. Some don't want God in their lives because that means they will have to change. We don't want the way we live to be disrupted! Healing and salvation are scary because it means a different way of life, a new order, a new reality, a new creation has arrived. Healing will cost us the way life is even though there are those who prefer for things to stay the same because not everyone wants to change or be changed. Not everyone wants to be healed. It's too costly. It may cost as much as your life because as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, "When Christ calls a [person], he bids him [or her] to come and die."

But we must always remember that we are not the only ones who die. We are not the only ones who incur costs due to healing. Our healing or salvation cost Jesus Christ his life, revealing that in order for something to heal, something must die—swine, demons, or life, as you know it. Healing costs but as you come to the table, I hope you realize that it is worth it.