

COVENANT MERCY SHOWN TO "THE OTHER SIDE":
A SERMON ON MARK 5:1-20

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Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Every age has its sign-seekers who imagine that the dynamic center of Christianity lies in its visible power and dramatic excitement instead of the sown Word and cultivated obedience to that Word.

It might appear that our text fuels this sentiment. A wild man is restored to normalcy when grazing pigs are driven by demons to their death by drowning. What a sign! What power!

But the focus of our text is not the miraculous exorcism of demons. What we hold onto from our text is not the sign, but the gospel proclaimed by Christ which he confirmed with the sign.

This claim may strike you as quite strange, since before the pigs' destruction Jesus had said only two things: "Come out of the man, unclean spirit!" and "What is your name?" But in this case the message of "how [Christ] had compassion" *follows* the sign which demonstrates that mercy (verse 19).

Signs serve the Word. Just as today the Spirit uses sacraments not to create faith, but to strengthen it, so too Jesus used signs: not to create faith, but to confirm the faith-creating-Word. In our text we see the essential unity of the work of Christ and the Spirit: they don't work differently, or at cross-purposes.

Our text proclaims to us *God's covenantal mercy shown to the other side--the Cultured Side*. We see in verses 1-13 the *need* for this covenantal mercy; in verses 14-17, the

response to this mercy; and in verses 18-20, the *result* of this mercy.

1. In Mark 5:1 we read: "Then they came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gadarenes." Jesus and his disciples went across the lake to the region of the Gadarenes or Gerasenes, that is, to the east side of the Sea of Galilee. This region was also called "Decapolis," a Greek name bearing the stamp of Greek culture and Greek life, a name meaning "ten cities." Among them were the cities of Gerasa, Damascus, and Pella, as well as others.

Jesus came to the cultured, Greekified side of the lake where the architecture, the monuments, the amusements, the games, and the theatrical centers all testified to "tasteful" living. To this upper-crust, cultured, suave society Jesus came to extend God's mercy.

But let's remember that this region on the "other side" was actually *covenant land*! This "Decapolis" had formerly belonged to Israel. We read in the book of Joshua how the Lord assigned and parcelled out the land of Palestine to the tribes--including this land on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the land of the Gerasenes. This was the land God had given to Manasseh and to Gilead.

But along with that gift of the land on the other side of Lake Galilee God had given Israel the commandment to root out, to exterminate, to purify from the land all false religion--and to do that out of love for their covenant Lord. But the Lord's people had not done that. And we see the consequence of their disobedience here in our text.

You see, Jesus had gone to the other side of the lake seeking the lost sheep of Israel. He came to reclaim God's covenant *people* and God's covenant *land*. But who is the first person he meets in this cultured land, this land of Greek heroes and architecture? His welcoming committee is a crazy man who lived in the cemetery--unruly hair, unkempt appearance, poorly clad--a man who spent his days in Decapolis screaming and mutilating himself.

Here we observe something as old as sinful mankind, that the highest of human culture cannot escape the blemishes and ravages of sin. Alongside our opera halls we construct hospitals. In the shadow of our skyscrapers stand our psychiatric wards. And behind our sports stadiums we hide our jails and prisons. The highest culture can't escape the blemishes of sin. Demons lived in Decapolis, deformity in the midst of high culture. And the blight of all godless culture--the Bible testifies to this--is that its cultural accomplishments are covered with scabs.

You and I are surrounded by efforts to raise the level of culture. Economically and technologically we pursue the ideal that tomorrow's children live better than today's children. We seek to guarantee the right of every man to work. And people try to implement the educational ideal that every child be able to read. Somebody has decided that every boy and girl should learn how to use a computer.

Echoing amid all these cultural pursuits and written above all these cultural ideals is Scripture's warning: "Apart from me you can do nothing!" The most fervent cultural spirit cannot obscure the emptiness of life without Christ and of culture without Christ.

But there's more here in Decapolis: beyond deformity there is also *apostasy*. Look at the pigs (verse 11)--almost two thousand of them grazing on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus: "Send us among the pigs, allow us to go into them."

Pigs! In the Lord's country! When the Lord settled Israel in his land of Canaan, he gave her a set of dietary regulations, among them a rule forbidding Israel to eat pork, to have anything to do with pigs, because they were unclean animals. And one of the consequences of Manasseh's failure--or better put: *refusal*--to root out the Canaanites is that the spirit and lifestyle of compromise came to characterize the residents on "the other side" of the lake.

You see, Jesus not only encounters gross deformity amid grand culture, but he stares straight into the face of apostasy. That herd of grazing pigs proclaimed the need of these

people for covenantal mercy: they were living disobediently. Their entire economic system was built upon corruption: here were two thousand reasons for Christ coming to the "other side"!

But how does the Son of God bring covenantal mercy to Decapolis? The Servant of the Lord, whose food and drink was to do the will of his Sender, came fulfilling all righteousness by destroying the pigs. *That* is the content of covenantal mercy: a Substitute doing what God's people refused to do, namely, love God by keeping his commandments.

The reason Jesus went to the other side, the cultured side, was the deformity of sin and the disobedience of God's people. He went there not by accident. He was sent there by the Father, sent to redeem his people, his deformed, apostate, "cultured" people.

Young people, this too is the need of our culture today. Whether you're talking about rock music or movies or dancing or whatever, the need of our culture today is for God's covenantal mercy in terms of keeping God's commandments. It's the need for a Savior who is a Mediator-Substitute, one who fulfills all righteousness for us.

Our culture, brothers and sisters, doesn't need the kind of Jesus who fits into our socio-political mold, who inspires a feeling of well-being, who matches our cultural ideals of fun and sociability. We need a Savior who fulfills righteousness, a Savior who with his Word and his power, with his preaching and his signs, comes to *purify the land of sin and iniquity*. That's who our culture needs, and that's the meaning of the miracle Jesus performs, the miracle of casting out the legion of demons from the man and putting them into the herd of pigs. The sign performed by Christ dealt with their real need: to be rid of deformity and disobedience!

2. Christ's miracle was an act of righteousness whose intention was to restore the Father's claim upon his people and his land. But our text also indicates the response to this merciful entrance of Christ (verses 14-17). What happened when Jesus came to *give* life to one and to *take away* life

from others?

What did these herdsmen report when they went running through the countryside back to the city?

What they reported we learn from the text. In their eyes what had happened was not the entrance of the King of kings into the Decapolis, but an economic collapse. Not the restoration of God's claim upon his people and his land, but the destruction of a marketable product. Their bread and butter were gone. The butchers were out of business!

When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed sitting there dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the man, and told about the pigs as well. Don't forget the pigs.

And so the people begin to plead with Jesus: "Get out of here, please! Get out of here, before you cost us more."

Here once more Scripture reminds us that the grace and mercy of our God and of our Savior Jesus Christ are always accompanied with judgment. The healing of the demoniac is accompanied by judgment upon God's disobedient people living in the Lord's land.

The same act which *gave* life to the one *took away* life from the many.

This is characteristic of God's mercy. When God's Word comes to make us holy and to reshape us, it also cuts and severs and slices and rips out the sin that we like to cherish and nurture. The mercy of God, promising us forgiveness of sins and eternal life, never comes to us without the demand to repent and the demand to turn away from the sin that we commit.

There's another interesting fact in our text. We hear a lot today about Jesus' concern for "the poor." Some are even saying that Christ came to identify with "the poor." People build a theology on that idea, and you get the "theology of liberation." The church must now identify with "the poor" and take up the cause of the economically oppressed.

Nationals gripped by poverty are incited to liberate themselves, to overthrow oppressive social structures in South America, in South Africa, all over the world.

But look at our text--what does *Jesus Christ* do in cultured Decapolis? Does he identify with "the poor"? Quite the opposite: he *makes* men poor! He makes men economically poor for the sake of the claim of the covenant. This means that we must be very careful about seeing Jesus as a social reformer and a humanistic sympathizer.

What's the response, then, to Jesus' act of fulfilling all righteousness? It was to reject it, to choose against it. And for Christ that constitutes suffering at the hands of culture.

See here our Savior suffering because of cultured man's sins--on account of *our* cultural sins, our sophisticated disobedience. He endured the pain of an apostate, God-forsaking culture--a culture in which the only one to recognize him is a man housing demons: living, embarrassing proof that Jesus was despised and rejected by "cultured" man, truly a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, as one from whom "cultured" men hide their faces. He was "culturally" despised, and we "cultured" people didn't esteem him, didn't honor him!

That's the kind of culture we're living in today; this describes all those suave, sophisticated rejectors of Christ with whom we rub shoulders, support the symphony, work in construction, teach in school. We use the word "secular" to describe the kind of society and the kind of people who ask the Lord to leave, who don't want anything to do with God. A lifestyle that "boxes God out" is a secular lifestyle. And that's all around us.

In many respects the culture in which we share is no different than the culture of Decapolis. Christ is mocked and abused today in so many refined ways--ways that you and I have become used to, ways that influence us.

Take the use of the Lord's Day: for you the Lord's Day is "church day." But for unbelieving, "cultured" man it's Superbowl Sunday, CBS Sports Sunday, play-off Sunday.

What a mockery of the Christ to whom alone all honor and adoration belong! While our culture erects its Sunday hero-worship as a rival to the church's Savior-worship, imagine that there are "Christians" urging us to cut back on our worship of Christ so we can relax together as fun-loving families!

Or what of sexual purity? To the unbelieving, "cultured" person today sexual cleanness is old-fashioned, un-fun and narrow-minded. What a struggle for you young people to keep your minds clean and your bodies pure and your motives holy! But what a mockery of the Christ whose relationship to his Bride is symbolized in a marriage that is sexually monogamous and chaste! That's what is really going on as TV's situation-comedies tear down chastity and entertain with innuendo: Christ is being rejected. The Word of the Lord is being cast away.

Let's not kid ourselves: our crucified, despised Savior is still being rejected by "cultured" man--not now in Decapolis, but in Denver, Detroit and Dallas. By "cultured" men and women in Doon, Dutton and Delavan.

Unbelieving "cultured" man rejects Jesus Christ and asks him to leave.

And yet, we ache and yearn for our culture's conversion. We long to see the power-brokers of twentieth century humanity, the idea-shapers, the media-executives--and all their "cultural products"--placed in service to King Jesus.

So we talk about "redeeming culture": we've got to redeem movies, redeem the dance, redeem every area of life. But these are little more than the slogans of a subculture longing for cultural acceptance.

All you need do is ask yourself the question: "How is culture to be redeemed?" The answer of our text: culture is redeemed by the Word of Jesus Christ's atonement, the Word of God's covenant claim, which proclaims mercy and forgiveness, but a Word which also calls for repentance and conversion. Culture must be purified and cleansed by the atoning Mediator!

And the problem at this point, quite frankly, is that you and I are tempted to begin thinking that *Christ's* program of cultural redemption just isn't proceeding very well, and we had better help him out--say, by elevating ourselves to the position of *co*-redeemers with Christ! How silly of us, really now. And that when the Bible constantly reminds us that Christ is the *only* Savior and Redeemer--not the Christian!

3. Because the world throws away God's Word and crucifies Christ again, maybe you're embarrassed. You have to live next door to these people, work side by side with them. We need to share so much of creation with them, don't we? All the while, they're turning their backs to the Lord.

But our text encourages us by pointing out the fruit of Christ's work, a fruit that nourishes us with comfort. For in verses 18-20 we are shown how the sign serves the Word, how the miracle serves the proclamation.

Jesus is on the way to the cross. But he left someone behind on the "other side."

The healed man begged to go with Jesus, but was not permitted. Christ told him, "Go home to your family and tell how much the Lord has done for you, how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began talking. He began to tell in all Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and all the people were amazed.

Here's the climax of our text, the focal point of Christ's obedience. This is what Jesus wanted to accomplish: to leave someone behind with the message. This man's healing was but Christ's means to the goal of proclaiming God's mercy. Proclaiming that mercy not only to apostate Jews, but also to cultured Greeks.

Jesus didn't despise culture, nor did he turn up his nose at it. He is the Redeemer of culture who replaces its rotting foundation with the only enduring foundation, that of the Word of God. How did he do that in Decapolis? He sent this man away with a message.

And how does he do this today?

As the proclaimed Word of the Lord is lived obediently, culture is restored by that Word!

Notice the connection between verses 19 and 20. Jesus says, "Go home and tell your family how much the Lord has done, and how He has had mercy." And then we read in verse 20, "So the man went away and told how much Jesus had done." He went away confessing that Jesus was the Lord. Confessing that in Jesus-the-Messiah all the promises of the Messiah had been fulfilled, even the promise made long before to Manasseh, Gilead, and Ephraim about their land on "the other side." That promise we read in Jeremiah 15:18-20:

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Behold, I will punish the king of Babylon and his land, as I have punished the king of Assyria. But I will bring back Israel to his habitation, and he shall feed on Carmel and Bashan; his soul shall be satisfied on Mount Ephraim and Gilead. In those days and in that time," says the LORD, "the iniquity of Israel shall be sought but there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, but they shall not be found; for I will pardon those whom I preserve."

And that promise Jesus Christ fulfilled by going to "the other side," to Decapolis, to proclaim the covenant claim once more.

But Jesus went on to Jerusalem. He went on to Good Friday, to Easter and Ascension and Pentecost. And the church went out into the world.

How effective was this Word entrusted to the former demoniac?

Well, in A.D. 70 the Jewish nation revolted against Rome, so that the Roman soldiers came and wiped out Jerusalem. The Christians fled for their lives. And where did they flee? To Decapolis. To that "cultured" land which years before had received mercy from the Savior. They fled to the city of Pella, where they found refuge!

That this could happen, brothers and sisters, was the result of God's covenantal mercy, by which the demoniac was healed and sent out.

Redeeming culture? Yes. But what is culture's first need? Is it mere moral improvement? Does "culture" need to get rid of swearing, get rid of nudity, get suggestiveness out of dancing--is that what culture needs? A moral facelift?

No. Culture needs *atonement*. Cultured man requires the atoning mercy, the purifying grace, the cleansing of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Redeeming culture? Yes, indeed. But *who* redeems culture? Our text explodes the myth that it's our job to *redeem* all areas of life for Christ. Scripture teaches that as recipients of covenantal mercy we must point a deformed and disobedient culture (that is: deformed, disobedient, "cultured" *people*) to the Fountain of mercy, the Source of forgiveness and the Agent of cleansing: Jesus Christ, the obedient Suffering Servant of the Father, the One who fulfills all righteousness.

But how is culture transformed by Jesus Christ and his Word of mercy?

Through the faithful preaching and teaching of God's Word. We ourselves have seen that the need of our hearts is not moral improvement, but atoning mercy. And those who have received that mercy of the cross through that Word, why, they summon every cultured person to receive that same cultural mercy, to bring his gold, his technology, his art and music, under that merciful Word of the Savior.

Amen