

SENT TO SERVE

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Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

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Much to our dismay, hardly a day passes in which we don't see reports in the media of corruption in politics, churches, and others of influence and/or authority. This is just one of the dangerous temptations of power and fame: the capacity to use power and access to community goods for one's selfish advantage. And, of course, where opportunity lay, *opportunists* will then flock. Such is the magnet of statehouses and those in executive authority—from crooked cops to crooked presidents ... from shady school board members to unscrupulous national legislators. Thus, because misuse of power is so easy to fall into, *true* servants of the public good are that much *more* worthy of appreciation and honor.

Thinking about such things, a verse in this Sunday Mass's Gospel tends to get my attention most especially. In one of the synoptics' (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) accounts of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law, we read: "Simon's [Peter's] mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them." (Mark 1:30-31)

The moral of this account is not dissimilar from another reading we had at daily Mass this last week—that of Jesus and the apostles going to the Gentile territory of the Gerasenes (Mark 5). They come ashore essentially at a cemetery, obviously full of dead bodies—unclean for the Jews. And not only that but the land is filled with thousands of swine—VERY unclean and filthy for Jews. Also, imagine how it was with all those pigs roaming the landscape: the land may have had an almost unbearable stench. So, the image is one of absolute filth and degradation.

Enter a demons-possessed man, unrestrainable in his madness and who lived among the tombs. And yet the possessed man comes and falls down at the feet of Jesus, submitting himself to Him—the demons within recognizing Who Jesus is. Jesus expels the demons and thus heals the demoniac, the demons entering into the huge herd of swine, which promptly hurls itself into the sea. So even the "filthy" pigs cannot bear the infinitely greater filth of evil. Then we read, "... the man who had been possessed pleaded to remain with him."

In these two stories—the illness of Peter's mother-in-law and the healing of the demoniac—are discerned as the indication of when Christian faith truly takes hold: the persons want to be with Jesus and, in imitation of Jesus, seek to serve and not to be served. And God's grace and power can cleanse us even from the greatest sinfulness ... if we fall at the feet of Jesus and submit to His Word and direction. We often see this: when someone turns to Christ, his great burden is lifted, and he becomes a most ardent and energetic disciple. No longer relegated to "the tombs" of selfishness and corruption, but conscience and spirit enjoy great liberation. A contemporary image—and parallel theme—that comes to mind is MLK, Jr.'s in his iconic speech: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!"

Such is St. Paul's theme of the Christian church as a whole as being the body of Christ in the world: Jesus is the head which directs, we are the Body which acts. Christ is the will, and (ideally) we will be the Body acting according to that will. We are His hands to continue His work in the world...to build up the kingdom of God.

But in our Gerasenes story, we're thrown a bit of a curve ball at its conclusion. We read, after the healed demoniac's plea to accompany Him and the apostles: "Jesus would not permit him..." But why would this man be refused in his goodwill and newfound ardor?

Well, of course, Christ as God and Creator knows each of us to the "nth" degree—absolutely and totally: "... he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man." (John 2:25) For Him *not* to know would make Him less than divine, which is an oxymoron to mainstream Christian belief. So, Jesus knew quite well the gifts of the freed demoniac and his attendant capability (or lack of) to fulfill the role of apostle. Likewise, Peter's mother-in-law (whom we know of) did not accompany Jesus and His band of disciples after her healing, though we might imagine that her miraculous healing awakened a greater realization of the divine in her life to drive her to continue to serve others.

But the demoniac is not refused absolutely, but given his mission—one that every Christian is given: Jesus tells the freed demoniac: "Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you." And, in obedience to Jesus' instruction, "...the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him..."

As the word "apostle" comes from the root "to send," the man becomes another, though nameless, apostle—not accompanying Jesus in body, but in spirit ... sent to his family and community by Jesus to testify to Jesus and to his conversion/healing. He preaches to the Gentile—the unbelieving—communities even before St. Paul himself, reminding us of the universal Christian obligation to preach of Jesus to the world by our own words and actions ... always seeking to be lights to the world by spreading the Good News of Christ. After all, this is the greatest service—the greatest love of neighbor—of all.