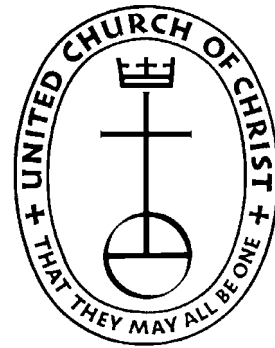


Lessons Learned in the Hot Dog Line

A Sermon By —
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The story of the healing of the man possessed by a legion of demons is not about miracles and pigs running into the sea. It is about Jesus transcending the stereotypes of his day. It is about not being threatened and reaching out with unconditional love and compassion to one who was wounded and suffering – this is the very essence of Jesus' ministry.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

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Reading: Mark 5:1-13

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The Gospel of Mark contains the most elaborate biblical tale about Jesus' healing. The setting for that story has Jesus and his disciples crossing the sea of Galilee, heading toward a series of Gentile villages.

They came to the region near Gerasa, on the other side of the lake. And when Jesus had disembarked, immediately a person with an unclean spirit met them. The possessed one lived among the tombs and could no longer be restrained, even with a chain. In fact, shackles and fetters had been used as restraints to no avail. No one had proved strong enough to subdue the demoniac. The sufferer would use stones to gash the flesh, howling day and night among the tombs without interruption.

Catching sight of Jesus, the bedeviled one ran up and bowed to Jesus, but then started shrieking in a loud voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Firstborn of the Most High God? Swear by God that you won't torture me!" For Jesus had been saying, "Come out of this person, unclean spirit."

"What is your name," Jesus asked that spirit.

"My name is Legion, for there are many of us," was the reply. And the possessed one begged Jesus not to send them all out of the area.

Now there was a large herd of pigs feeding on the mountainside, and the unclean spirits begged Jesus, "Send us to the pigs so we can enter them." Jesus gave them permission. And with that, the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs, and the herd of about 2,000 went rushing down the cliff into the lake and there they were drowned.

Listen to what biblical scholar Steve Patterson wrote about that passage: "As a modern person, I do not believe in the existence of spirits and demons. That ancient people did believe in such things helps me to understand the cultural context of this story and what it means – Jesus engaged in battle the things that render one unclean and outside the company of God and humanity. His ministry meant inclusion for the ostracized."

Jesus lived in a day when the culture of Israel as well as its religion had clear categories separating the clean and unclean. And this was a story with lots of images of

uncleanliness. Jesus went to a Gentile area; the Gentiles were considered unclean. A mentally ill man was seen as possessed by demons, rendering him unclean. The setting was a graveyard, unclean. And there was a herd of pigs, unclean animals.

Yet in the midst of all of that, Jesus' touch, his love, his presence convinced that man that he was still a beloved child of God, and in some way Jesus opened the door of recovery for him.

And there is clearly a political sense to this story. The Hebrews of Jesus' day used the word "legion" for only one thing: the Roman legions, the large companies of oppressive Roman soldiers. And just as in the Exodus when the oppressive Egyptian chariots were driven into the sea, so the demons of the Roman legions are pictured driven into the sea.

I think this story, using ancient metaphors, says that God's love accepts and affirms everyone and that God's presence ultimately overcomes oppression.

Now, let me tell you about an event in the life of Al Miles, a hospital chaplain from Honolulu who was vacationing in Washington, D.C. Here is the way he began his story:

"Listen people, don't y'all understand – I'm hungry! Who's gonna buy me a F---ing hot dog?!"

"It was a sunny autumn day in Washington, D.C. My wife and I were strolling around the mall and stopped at a concession stand. Several people were lined up, enjoying the sunshine while they waited their turn.

"But when the rumpled stranger approached the crowd and barked out his demand, the crowd fell silent, collectively holding its breath. His language and manner offended people, but no one dared further agitate him.

"He wasn't the only impoverished person asking something of more fortunate passersby. In this capital city of the world's richest country, there were people living on the street everywhere: people humiliated by poverty, squalor and hopelessness. Many held out their hands for a tidbit of what most Americans take for granted. Coins. Drinks. Hot dogs. I felt guilty as I strolled the pristine grassy lawn in my fancy shoes and expensive sport coat.

"On that warm day, the man pleading for a hot dog wore a long winter coat over dirty clothes, and his hair was unkempt. At about six-foot-six inches and nearly 300 pounds, he dwarfed my six-foot-three inch, 215-pound frame."

Miles continued, "Like me he was a dark brown African-American – which seemed to further intimidate the concession-stand patrons.

"Miss, would you please, please buy me a hot dog?" he begged while poking the arm of the young white woman at the head of the line. She looked terrified. Her face was flushed as she hurried away without completing her order.

"Ma'am, please buy me a hot dog," the man softly requested of the next people in line, a 60-year-old black woman and her adolescent grandson. They too backed away, making the man angry again. *What's wrong with all you people? he shouted. I want a F---ing hot dog, now!"*

Miles said, "I was offended by his tone and vile language. Nonetheless, I considered asking him, 'Brother, what would you like on your hot dog?' People were getting more frightened by the moment. I was less interested in helping the homeless man than in getting rid of him. I reached for my wallet as he approached the next two people standing in line, my wife and me.

"Touching my arm while putting his face just a few inches from mine, the homeless man asked: *Sir, don't you want to buy me a hot dog?* I began to feel vulnerable. Instead of offering him food, I backed away.

"He immediately became irate. Stomping away from the dwindling crowd, the hungry man looked at me and yelled, *I guess no one is gonna buy me a hot dog. I don't know what in the hell is wrong with you people, especially that black son of a bitch who keeps shaking his head at me!"*

Miles said, "I flung my sunglasses to the ground and glared at the raging man, My wife held me back from rushing him. *That's right, I'm talking to you,* the man continued. *You act like you're better than me. F---you, you black son of a bitch!* He then marched off.

"The scene quickly returned to normal. People relaxed and started chatting again. The older woman and her grandson came back. She would have purchased a hot dog for the destitute man, she said, were it not for his offensive language. Her soft eyes revealed her sense of guilt – I could tell she was wondering if she should have bought food for the man anyway, despite his behavior. Her grandson just seemed relieved. The man was 'weird,' he said.

"After purchasing sodas, my wife and I continued our walk. I had a hard time taking my mind off the Hot Dog Man. I was offended by the man's intrusiveness and enraged at his insults. 'But maybe I should have bought him a hot dog,' I said to my

wife. That simple gesture might have calmed his aggressiveness. We talked about it for a bit, then moved on.”

Miles then wrote, “After our vacation in Washington, my wife returned home and I flew to Las Vegas to speak at a conference where I received red-carpet treatment from my hosts: penthouse suite, sumptuous meals, generous honorarium, As I looked out of my hotel suite window at the garish Las Vegas streets, I suddenly found myself thinking about the Hot Dog Man again.

“I no longer felt angry at him. He was hungry and wanted food. Why hadn’t I acted more compassionately? I am a Christian minister. I preach, write and teach about the importance of caring for the less fortunate.

“Further, I’d been critical of people who use violence to work out their problems. I felt guilty and ashamed of my initial impulse to lash out at the man.

“I felt even worse about the superior manner I had assumed. I did shake my head disdainfully at him, just as he accused me.”

Miles said, “I’m embarrassed all the more because I know that part of my repulsion had to do with the fact that the man was black. Having worked hard to escape the ghetto in which I was born and raised, I don’t like to be reminded of the tenuousness of my own good fortune. Whenever I travel, I always encounter homeless African-American men begging for food or money. They are usually polite when I silently refuse their requests. But they often give me a quick glare or softly murmur underneath their breath. ‘One slip, one tiny mistake,’ I imagine them saying, ‘and you’d be right here with us!’” Miles said he was terrified by that possibility.

He said, “Had the homeless man been white, I doubt I would have reacted with such hostility. Even I hold our society’s stereotype of African-American men – that they are naturally violent and should be feared. I was making this very assumption about the Hot Dog Man. He was black and therefore violent.

“I also made negative assumptions about him because he was homeless. [This] encounter made me realize that I am at best condescending toward the homeless – be they black or from some other racial heritage, female or male, old or young.”

Then he switched. He said, “Consider the story of John. He and my wife, Kathy, have been friends for two years. A slight, malnourished homeless man, he nonetheless has a heart full of love and kindness. For 40 years the streets of Honolulu have been his home.”

Kathy met John while taking photos to accompany a national magazine's feature on aging – a busy map of deep lines crisscross his timeworn, leathery face. When the shoot was completed, Kathy continued to meet John for weekly lunches; their friendship deepened.

Now from the beginning, Al Miles criticized the relationship. It was okay for Kathy to use this impoverished man for her work, but Miles warned her that the closer she became to John the more difficult it would be to “get rid of him.”

Derisively, he told her, “Remember, if you feed a cat, it'll never leave your door.” Kathy's terse response left him speechless. She had no desire to “get rid of” John. She said, “He's not a cat; he's a child of God.” Her compassion made her husband re-evaluate his attitude. He has since gradually grown to care for John and accept John's friendship with Kathy.

Miles said, “I still sometimes feel pangs of shame over my initial bigotry toward him. Both John and the Hot Dog Man held a mirror to my soul, and I was not happy with what I saw. They reflected the prejudice I harbor against people less fortunate than I, and challenged me to become more humble.”

He concluded by saying, “Daily, I try to remember all the blessings given to me. I have not earned the many emotional, financial and spiritual riches I enjoy; and too often I take these gifts for granted. I pray that God will keep opening my heart, mind and soul, so that I will be able to better serve all of God's people.

Jesus reached out with love to that man in Gerasa – one whose behavior was undoubtedly as belligerent and threatening as that of the Hot Dog Man. Somehow, and that's what makes him so special, Jesus seemed able to find the presence of God in all those around him. He wasn't threatened by those who were different. In a society that demeaned women, he managed to treat them as equals. In a society that saw no value in children until they grew up, Jesus took them onto his lap. In a society that cast out those deemed unclean and unworthy, Jesus selected those very people as the folks with whom he would live and build his reform movement.

For the last few years, we have had some like the Hot Dog Man sleeping outside our church each evening. Some of those chronically homeless folks suffer from the demons of substance abuse or the demons related to the traumas of war or the demons of mental illness. So some of them have shouted inappropriately or become angry without reason. But nevertheless they are children of God.

I have finally given up on letting people sleep outside the church. There were too

many people for too little space. There were too many fights. There are no restrooms open downtown at night, so we constantly had the smell of urine on the sidewalk. Pressure from neighbors, from city officials, from our Council member, from the police, from some of our own members was just too much. During the last couple years, we made a number of concessions and compromises, but it never seemed enough. Folks just don't like seeing the homeless; they are afraid of them.

And we don't have the money to hire someone to watch over those who sleep here – if we had that money we could have opened the courtyard and let them sleep there and use our restrooms. But I suspect many of our members would not have wanted that to happen.

So now there is really no well-lighted area where downtown's chronically homeless can sleep together so they feel safe and create community. Who knows, perhaps the Hot Dog Man slept outside there one night.

The story of the healing of the man from Geraza is not about miracles and pigs running into the sea. It is about Jesus transcending the stereotypes of his day. It is about not being threatened and reaching out with unconditional love and compassion to one who was wounded and suffering. That was the very essence of Jesus' ministry; that's what almost all the stories are about.

And it is that Jesus who calls to us, "Come, follow me."