

Value the Vulnerable

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Introduction

As we near the end of our post-Easter series Reckless Love, we arrive at a question that has been building for weeks: what do we do with the people we'd rather avoid? We've explored what it means to begin with love, expand the circle, give lavishly, and love openheartedly. This week, we are called to go further, toward the people our communities have written off.

In Mark 5, Jesus crosses into Gentile territory and encounters a man living among the tombs, feared and avoided by everyone around him. Even though the community has given up on him, Jesus doesn't hesitate to engage. What happens between them raises questions about who we consider worth our time, our attention, and our love. Bishop Tom Berlin's Reckless Love continues as our companion guide as we consider what it means to value the vulnerable.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApBud3cq-IU>

In this clip from Edward Scissorhands (1990), a suburban Avon saleswoman walks into an abandoned mansion and meets a young man everyone else has been too afraid to approach.

Why This Video?

Peg is afraid when she sees Edward. She says so, and she starts to leave. When he asks her to stay, she looks again. When she does, she sees a person with cuts on his face. Her response is almost comically practical: she pulls out a cotton ball and dabs astringent on his scars. She begins to treat him like a person, asking his name. And when she realizes he's scared and alone, she takes him home.

Video Discussion Questions

1. The house is surrounded by an elaborate garden and colorful plants, and everything inside is gray, dusty, and falling apart. What do you notice about the contrast between the outside and the inside? What might that tell you about Edward's world?
2. Peg walks into the house calling "Avon calling!" as if this is just another stop on her route. What does it suggest that Peg treats this visit the same way she'd treat any other?
3. When Peg first sees Edward clearly, she's frightened. She apologizes and turns to leave. What does she hear when Edward says, "Don't go"? Of course she hears his words, but what else? Why do you think she stays?
4. Edward says, "I'm not finished." He seems to be referencing his hands, and maybe he means himself. What do you hear in those words? Have you ever felt unfinished in a way that was hard to explain to someone else?
5. Peg's first real act toward Edward is dabbing astringent on the cuts on his face. It's a small, almost absurd gesture given the circumstances. Think of a time when someone did something small and practical for you during a hard time. Did it make a difference? How?

6. Edward has newspaper clippings on his wall. What did you notice about the clippings? What do you think they mean to him? Why do you think he selected those particular clippings? What does it tell you about how he understands himself?
7. Peg asks Edward about his parents. He answers, “He didn’t wake up.” She nods and asks, “Are you alone?” When someone gives you a short, painful answer, how do you decide whether to ask more or let it rest?

Mark 5:1-20 (NRSVue)

¹They came to the other side of the sea, to the region of the Gerasenes. ²And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³He lived among the tombs, and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain, ⁴for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces, and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him, ⁷and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” ⁸For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” ⁹Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” ¹⁰He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the region. ¹¹Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding, ¹²and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” ¹³So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine, and the herd, numbering about two thousand, stampeded down the steep bank into the sea and were drowned in the sea.

¹⁴The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵They came to Jesus and saw the man possessed by demons sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion, and they became frightened. ¹⁶Those who had seen what had happened to the man possessed by demons and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. ¹⁸As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹But Jesus refused and said to him, “Go home to your own people, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you.” ²⁰And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed.

Scripture Study Questions

1. The “region of the Gerasenes” is Gentile territory, as the large herd of pigs makes clear. Jesus and his disciples have crossed a significant boundary just by showing up. When have you found yourself in an unfamiliar environment where you felt out of place? What did it take to stay rather than leave?
2. Mark describes the man in extraordinary detail: living among the tombs, breaking chains, howling, bruising himself with stones. Why do you think the Gospel writer spends so much time on these details? What do they tell you about how this man’s community understood him?
3. Jesus’ first move is to speak directly to the unclean spirit and demand its identity. Berlin suggests we too must “make an effort to learn the names” of the forces that threaten people in our communities.

What are the forces you see doing real damage to vulnerable people around you? What happens when those forces go unexamined?

4. After the man is healed, the Gerasenes find him “sitting there, clothed and in his right mind,” and their response is fear. They beg Jesus to leave. Why would healing provoke fear? When have you seen an act of compassion or restoration make people uncomfortable rather than grateful?
5. The healed man asks to go with Jesus, and Jesus says no. Instead, he tells the man to go home and tell his own people what God has done for him. What does it mean that Jesus gives this man a purpose immediately after restoring him? What does that tell you about how Jesus sees vulnerable people?
6. Berlin writes that Jesus “saw their intrinsic value, the image of God that was imprinted upon their lives.” Think about someone in your own community who is regularly overlooked or avoided. What would it take to see that person the way Jesus sees the man in this story?
7. The man goes and begins to proclaim throughout the Decapolis what Jesus has done for him, “and everyone was amazed.” His story becomes the thing that opens doors for others. What from your own experience of God’s work in your life could you share with someone who needs to hear it? What holds you back?

Weekly Action

Last week’s message was titled Openhearted Love. As a reminder, write the letter O on a post-it note and add it next to your B, E, and L. Each week of this series we add a letter to help us live out these commandments.

Jesus demands the demon’s identity before he addresses it. You have to recognize what’s going on around you before you can do anything about it. This week, be in prayer for clarity, and then pay attention to one specific issue in your community that is harming vulnerable people. Write it down on a notepad or a digital device. Ask: what is the problem, who does it affect, and what is one concrete step that could help? Be sure to ground what you write in your faith. Share it with a trusted spiritual partner or family member, and ask: what do we do about this?

Prayer

Almighty God, in Jesus you made yourself vulnerable for our sake, and to bring us back into relationship with you. We pray for your Holy Spirit’s guidance and support as we strive to love others with your all-embracing love, especially the vulnerable people we are often too quick to count as outsiders. May we express curiosity about their stories and their lives. May we engage unfamiliar people and situations. May we have expectations for the people we help to take part in their healing. May we act with kindness. We praise you for including us in the circle of your love, O God, and commit ourselves to loving the vulnerable ones to whom you have joined us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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