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## Mark 5:1-20

*5 They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. <sup>2</sup> And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. <sup>3</sup> He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, <sup>4</sup> for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. <sup>5</sup> Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. <sup>6</sup> And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. <sup>7</sup> And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." <sup>8</sup> For he was saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" <sup>9</sup> And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many." <sup>10</sup> And he begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. <sup>11</sup> Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, <sup>12</sup> and they begged him, saying, "Send us to the pigs; let us enter them." <sup>13</sup> So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea.*

*<sup>14</sup> The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. <sup>15</sup> And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. <sup>16</sup> And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. <sup>17</sup> And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. <sup>18</sup> As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. <sup>19</sup> And he did not permit him but said to him, "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." <sup>20</sup> And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.*

## **Evil is from within.**

I'm going to deal with a serious topic: evil. What is it that causes people to do horrible things? To commit what we as Christians would call grievous sins? Let's start with our Bible passage for today, from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has just told several parables and then he calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee. After crossing the sea, he encounters a man who is already unclean in the eyes of the Jews around him because he is a Gentile. But worse, he has been living among the tombs of the dead; dead bodies were considered extraordinarily unclean by the Jews. Worse, we are told that he also has an "unclean spirit". The demon who is possessing him has given him superhuman strength: chains cannot bind him, and no one is strong enough to restrain him. He has been cutting himself with stones and crying out. Then we are told this: <sup>6</sup>*And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. <sup>7</sup>And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me."* <sup>8</sup>*For he was saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"* <sup>9</sup>*And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many."* We're not told how he recognizes Jesus. The demon is in truth many demons, and to emphasize this, they call themselves Legion; a legion is a unit of 6,000 men in the Roman army. Apparently, the demons within the man force him to kneel down

before Jesus and beg that he not harm them; the demons, known collectively as Legion, are aware that Jesus is divine and could do them great harm. We are then told this: <sup>11</sup> *Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside,* <sup>12</sup> *and they begged him, saying, "Send us to the pigs; let us enter them."* <sup>13</sup> *So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea.* At the request of the demons, Jesus casts them into a herd of pigs, but Jesus sends them down a steep bank to drown in the Galilee. Then the Gentiles who had witnessed the casting of the demons into the pigs and the death of the pigs beg Jesus to please leave the area; they are afraid of the incredible power of this man. But the man who has been freed from the demons asks if he can stay with Jesus. Jesus refuses and tells the man: *"Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you."* Then we are told this about the man who has been healed: <sup>20</sup> *And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.* The Decapolis is an area that would have had many Gentiles living there; it means "ten cities" in Greek and is now an area in Jordan. Jesus is cleverly using this event to spread the Word to Gentiles. The fact that Gentiles lived there is why they were raising pigs; Jews would never have done this.

As modern Christians, what do we make of this story? Is the man mentally ill and not possessed? That's what we would think today. We might take this as a metaphor, a way of explaining that Jesus governs everything. Even the most powerful evil cannot stand up to Jesus. Now Mark, the Gospel writer, probably never met Jesus and was just a kid when Jesus died. So, whether we think the story is literal or whether we think it is a metaphorical tale that was told to Mark by early believers, it doesn't change the central thrust of this story. Evil is a literal, very real threat throughout the New Testament. The Lord's Prayer, from the Gospel of Matthew, and spoken by Jesus himself includes the line: <sup>13</sup>*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.* Also in Matthew, Jesus encounters Satan, the author of evil. We read this:

*4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup>And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup>But Jesus answered, "It is written, " 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "*

Jesus also says: *"Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' "* Jesus ends the threat of Satan when he says: *"Be gone, Satan! For it is written, " 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.' "*

Here is a theological slant: In Genesis, we are told that God created everything and that everything he created was good. There was no evil originally.

God did not create evil. But God gave us a free will, and for many of us, our free will is our complete undoing. Who were the first people to fall victim to their own free wills? The metaphorical first people, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God. So, people are the ones who do evil things. But it's a little more complicated than this. Remember that in the Adam and Eve story they are tempted by Satan. Now, God only creates good stuff. Satan must therefore have been good originally. He, for some reason, at some point, embraced evil and turned against God. We are thus tempted in some way to do things that we know are wrong, things that are evil. We abandon our responsibility to do good and instead fall into evil. Today, we're free to believe or not believe that Satan is a literal being. Satan, in his role as our tempter, could be seen as the personification of temptation, of a tendency to rebel against God for selfish reasons. But the bottom line is that we create evil.

The most visible evil event going on in our world is the war in Ukraine. We see the leader of Russia launching a massive war against a neighboring country, against a country with strong ethnic, family, and religious ties to Russia. It seems that Putin wants to rebuild the Soviet Union, or at least recapture some of the power and glory of the Soviet Union. Putin is perhaps a very frustrated, failed man. Russia is a vast country, with a population 5.5 times the size of Australia's, but with an economy roughly the same size as Australia's. Russia has struggled horribly

since the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago. Russia went on a massive privatization drive during the 1990's, under Boris Yeltsin. The idea was to turn it into a democratic, capitalistic economy, rather than a totalitarian state. But instead of allowing everyday Russians the opportunity to build businesses, Russia sold its assets extremely cheaply to ex-communist insiders called oligarchs. They created an extraordinarily corrupt, crony-based capitalistic society. So, now, Russia, a huge exporter of oil, has left most of the population in relative poverty. The minimum wage in Russia is the lowest of all developed nations, at less than \$200 a month. This was before the war caused the Russian economy to collapse even further. In rural areas, children starve. Most families in Russia struggle to feed themselves.

We could see why Putin might be tempted to launch a war to somehow bring back the greatness he associates with the Soviet era. He was born in Leningrad, now known by its original, historical name Saint Petersburg, and studied law at Leningrad State University. He graduated in 1975. He worked as a KGB agent for 16 years, rising to the rank of lieutenant. In 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed, he became a politician in Saint Petersburg. But can we blame it all on Putin? Is he the Satan of Russia, tempting its vast military and most of its civilians to support the war? I happen to have an old associate, not a friend, but a fellow academic researcher, who is Russian. I talked to him recently. What he told me is

that certainly in the early days of the war, everyone he knew supported the war because they thought they were protecting Russian speakers who live in Ukraine, near Russia. Over time, it grew into a belief that Russia should take control of these regions, called Donetsk and Luhansk. Remember that Putin called Ukrainian forces “neo-Nazis”, saying that they were Fascists, and said that Ukraine isn’t a true democracy. In truth, before the war, Ukraine was considered second only to Russia in its level of corruption among European nations. Ukraine was labeled “partly free” by most analysts. This isn’t to say that the war is fine, that it is moral, that Putin is justified in what he is doing. There is no question that the war is an attempt at colonial expansionism via mass violence. The war is certainly very wrong.

But does this tell us something about Satan, about evil? Whether Satan is literally a fallen angel and the tempter of humanity, or if he is merely the way the Bible authors chose to personify the nature of temptation, of greed in humanity, we often rationalize the bad things we do. We find a way to see our acts as somehow good. Whoever we have harmed asked for it; they got what they deserved. They’re evil, and so what we do to them does not matter. This is of course not at all what Jesus taught. He embraced unqualified forgiveness. In Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus is quoted as saying this: <sup>38</sup> *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’* <sup>39</sup> *But I say to you, Do not resist the*

*one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.* <sup>40</sup> *And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.* <sup>41</sup> *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.* Remember, they didn't walk for exercise like we do. They walked out of necessity: it was the only way to get around, and they had to save their energy for getting food and finding shelter. Jesus did not rationalize evil, like we do. When tempted, he simply said no. There was no compromise with him. I have tried largely to quote the Gospels in this message, to make sure that I am talking specifically about the teachings of Jesus, and that I stick closely to the beliefs of Christians. But here is something from the words of Isaiah, serving as a prophet and speaking for God:

<sup>20</sup> *Woe to those who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness,  
who put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter!*

This is for me the bottom line when it comes to evil. We are indeed its creators, and God holds us to a very high standard. We are not to compromise when it comes to doing right and wrong. We are never to do something evil, then rationalize it into something that is somehow supposed to be good. Spiritual darkness is not spiritual light. At the same time, because we understand our own



limitations, we must be careful about judging others, and we have to be willing to be very free with our forgiveness.

I asked my friend from Russia, a highly educated person with a Ph.D. and someone who has traveled widely around the world, what he thought of the war in Ukraine, now that he has seen all the destruction, the millions of women and children fleeing for the borders, and the thousands of people who have probably been killed. He is a Christian, an Orthodox believer, and it was he who made me think of this sermon. He brought up the story of the demons named Legion who were cast into the swine and then drowned, a story that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He said that when he thinks of the war, he thinks about Jesus and how Jesus believes that every human is valuable, because every person is made in the image of God. That crazed man in the Bible, and who was feared and hated by those around him, was worthy of whatever Jesus could do to save him. My associate said that he wished that Putin would put that much value on human life and would refuse to treat some human lives as worthless. Please pray with me. *God, we fall to the temptation of greed. We want to do what is best for ourselves and so we rationalize evil. Help us to hold to the highest standard possible. Whenever we are tempted to do wrong, help us take that temptation, cast it into a herd of swine – and then drown those swine in the sea. Amen.*