

Text: [Luke 8:26-39](#)

Date: June 19, 2022

Title: “The Cost of Transformation”

Theme: The transformation of individual lives is the goal of the gospel, but often our communities of faith are not prepared to pay the cost.

1

If there's one particular type of viral video I really enjoy, it's the “before and after” video

You've probably seen them: powerwashing, sandblasting, car detailing, furniture refinishing

I get hooked on these videos

I especially like watching the restoration of an “abandoned” thing

A car left in a garage, or out in the woods for the past 50 years

Being transformed and restored back into something beautiful

It's satisfying, like witnessing a resurrection

A restoration & renewal of something that had been forgotten

And discarded

But invariably, because it is the internet – after all

And no one can ever agree on anything

You end up with comments that say things like:

“It was better before you messed with it”

Especially when it comes to furniture or woodwork

There are people who might want to see it cleaned up a little

But they don't understand why you'd want to change things SOOO much

2

You might have even experienced a bit of this in your own life

Maybe YOU'RE the before and after photo

And people around you struggled to accept ways that you had changed

Maybe you grow up in a certain place, people knew you in a certain way

They called you by a childhood nickname that you outgrew but couldn't get away from

And when you started to develop a way of thinking about the world that was
your own
Or when you began to view the world through a different lens, you found
that you couldn't easily go home again
That certain relationships got more difficult
Because YOU had changed

Or perhaps it's not even a coming-of-age story that I'm talking about in
terms of a transformation
Maybe it's just a decision you made to invest in yourself

You started going to the gym, taking care of your health, stopped drinking
Or you started seeing a therapist to work through things that had been
bothering you for a long time
Maybe you finally came back to church after a long absence, or decided to
try it for the first time – turning to faith, prayer, and the Scriptures in
search of a larger meaning in life
And when these things began to change you, people in your circle started
reacting to you differently than they once had

3

Today's story from Luke's gospel paints a picture of how the transformation
in one person's life often puts a strain on the community around them
In very clear terms, we see how what's good news for one isn't always
seen as good news for all
In fact, it's sometimes seen as too much to take

I am struck by the fact that it sounds like even BEFORE Jesus gets out of
the boat, the demon-possessed man comes running toward him
I'm not sure how interpret the text except to say that the man seems to
come RUNNING toward the one who can save him
What this says to me is that the man DESPERATELY wants to find healing

He has been living on his own for a long time
He's been homeless, outcast, rejected
No one has been able to help him
In fact, no one even cared to try

Instead, the best the people around him felt they could do was to try and protect themselves FROM him
So they put him in chains and consigned him to live among the dead
Out among the tombs

When Jesus meets the man, he is tormented – naked and raving
This is his BEFORE picture
Everything about the way he's described points us to the reality of how the man must feel: less than human

He's so tortured in his mind that he can only describe the spirits who possess him as "Legion"
– a reference to a military unit of 6000 Roman soldiers
And you can see the battle raging inside him
Running toward Jesus for help, on the one hand
And then, on the other, begging Jesus not to torture him

I don't know how we should understand what's happening to the man
It seems pointless to debate a modern mental health diagnosis versus embracing the point of view of the scripture that he's possessed
On some level, it doesn't really matter
What matters is that the encounter he has with Jesus makes all the difference for this man, who has been suffering alone for so long

The Son of the Most High God casts out the demons, sending them into a herd of pigs -
which tells us the whole episode happens in a non-Jewish region
And when the locals come to see what's happened, and why the pigs have thrown themselves off the cliff
They find the man clothed, in his right mind, and sitting at the feet of Jesus
This is the AFTER moment we all look and long for
Here, "sitting at the feet of" is a kind of technical term that indicates "in a posture of listening and learning"

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Clearly, the man's life has been transformed
Because this is what an encounter with Jesus will do
We STILL run toward him because we STILL trust and believe that he has the power to create a different story for us

It doesn't matter what you come to be healed from
The pain of your past, fears in your present, anxiety about your future
When our lives don't make sense to us anymore,
when we feel beset by a Legion of problems,
we turn to Jesus because we have seen what he's done in the lives of
others
How they've been changed
How they've found peace and forgiveness, meaning and wholeness

Because transformed lives have the power to transform a whole community
– if we're open to it

Now, its true, most of our transformations are not as dramatic as what we
read about today
It's not an internet before-and-after video where 90 days happens in 90
seconds

I mean, WE can see the change
The people around us can see the change
But it's more subtle
It happens over a period of time where we turn our lives over to God
When we pray, when we seek God's guidance alongside all of the other
tools God has given us for our health and well-being

I mean, if I have an alcohol problem, I can't just pray for things to get better
and do nothing
Prayer is a great first step, but then I've got to: go to a rehab
I've got to go to a meeting
I've got to do the work

I move toward Christ, just like the man in the story
And when I do that, Christ meets me, and does the work in me

5

NOW, there's one thing I have left to say about this scripture
And that's the great challenge it presents to the church, along with a great
opportunity
The opportunity is that transformation leads to more transformation

Because we long to see changed lives, don't we?
That's our mission:
LOVE God, SERVE people, TRANSFORM lives
We have it written in real big letters above the doorway

But look at what happens here – here's the challenge: the transformation
this man experiences is TOO MUCH for his community to take
And we have this internet moment where people respond: "It was better
before you messed with it"

It was one thing for his people to see him tormented by devils
For him to be the abandoned thing, out among the tombs
But safely at a distance from them

Now, he's been healed
He's well
He no longer represents a risk to himself or others
And yet the people tell his healer: YOU'RE NOT WELCOME HERE

The after photos are jarring, they're disruptive, they're costly
It means that the barbeque is canceled
Because suddenly the price of pork has gone way up

And the man KNOWS, after seeing people's response to Jesus, that his
presence is going to continue making people uncomfortable
So he begs Jesus, "take me with you"
Which can be read as just a simple expression of gratitude

Or, maybe what he's saying is:
"Jesus, to these people, I'm ALWAYS going to be that guy who lived in the
tombs"
And you know what? He's probably right.
In the same way that, when you go back home, you may ALWAYS be
called by your childhood nickname
Just because WE'RE different doesn't mean everyone is ready to walk that
journey with us

Jesus probably knows that too: perhaps THAT'S why he tells the man to do
the harder thing
"Go home and tell everyone what God has done for you"

So as a church, we've got to remember that the business of transforming lives is often be a messy one
It's not easy to walk with people through life change
It takes time and effort – our lives are disrupted
It costs us something

I can't tell you how many stories I've heard of work that churches do that causes people in the community to get upset
Start a feeding program, start a homeless shelter
And people are up in arms about the people that you're bringing into the neighborhood
This is precisely why there is not ONE permanent homeless shelter in Burlington County
Transformation of lives involves a cost to the community – and not everyone is ready to pay it

I remember one time being in a small group
With a vet, a guy who was suffering PTSD
He came to the church because his life wasn't making sense
He was getting help through the VA too, but he needed spiritual support
The thing was, when we prayed together, and he was real with the group about what he was going through
It was hard to take
The stories were difficult to hear
And ultimately we didn't serve him well
Because we weren't prepared, as a community, to pay the cost
In time, in listening, in care
To be part of God's work of transformation in his life

Life change is the goal of the gospel
We all want to see the before and after video
But too often we as a community – even a community of faith – are not ready to pay the cost

This the promise and the challenge of the gospel
The promise is transformation.
The challenge is disruption and discomfort.

And we don't get one without the other.
So we have to be a community that embraces the promise
and is prepared to pay the cost.

Amen.

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