

The undomesticated Savior: Mark 5:21-43

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by [Katherine Layzer](#) in the [June 16, 2009](#) issue

Jesus recrosses the Sea of Galilee after some local unpleasantness cuts short his visit to the Decapolis. “[The Gerasenes] began to beg him to leave their neighborhood” (Mark 5:17). Are these pig farmers afraid because he commands unclean spirits? Or are they worried about their livelihood?

The word *beg* (*parakaleo*) is used three times in the story of the Gerasene demoniac and again in Mark 5:23. In the passage skipped over by the lectionary, Mark 5:1–20, the demons beg Jesus not to send them out of the country. The local farmers beg him to go away and not bother them any more. The former demoniac, newly clothed and in his right mind, begs to accompany Jesus back to Galilee. Back in his own neighborhood, Jesus is confronted by Jairus, a prominent member of the community, who begs him to come lay hands on his daughter and heal her.

These contrasting reactions to Jesus are repeated many times in Mark. Apparently some people are determined to get rid of Jesus—and some are willing to push through any barrier to get near him.

The people who dig through a neighbor’s roof and lower their paralyzed friend to Jesus are in the second group, as is the Syrophenician woman who begs and goes on begging Jesus to heal her daughter, ignoring his curt dismissal. Blind Bartimaeus shouts at the top of his lungs as everyone tries to hush him. The woman with her jar of costly nard barges into a house where she is not welcome and pours her life savings on Jesus’ head.

The truest test of faith, says Mark, is whether it will let anything stand in its way.

Jairus has a reputation and a position to uphold. It would probably be better for him not to be seen talking to Jesus, let alone asking him to his house. But Jairus stands in front of a crowd of onlookers and pleads with Jesus until he gets his way.

The woman with the flow of blood is supposed to avoid all human contact. She has no business reaching through the press of bodies to grasp Jesus’ cloak, yet she pushes through, stretching out her arm as he passes by. She is healed where she stands.

These people are boundary crossers, just as Jesus is. He’s willing to bend the rules, and so are they. He goes against convention for the sake of the kingdom; he flouts the purity code and brushes aside distinctions of gender and class. So do the mostly nameless men and women who come begging for his help.

Where are these seekers today? Where are those beggars who won’t take no for an answer, who insist on getting close to Jesus and not letting anything stand in their way?

I haven’t noticed them pushing to get into our church lately. I go looking for them, but I don’t seem to be showing up in the right places. Has everyone who wants to find Jesus already found him?

Some have visited churches that bear his name and have decided that he's not inside. Their experience of church is like having a thrifty relative save a box that once had chocolates in it and giving it to you at Christmas with half a dozen white handkerchiefs in it. There's nothing wrong with white handkerchiefs. They're useful and proper and remind you of your grandmother. But what you were really hoping for—yearning for, craving!—was chocolate, chocolate with chili pepper in it, the kind you get in Central America—fiery, rich and satisfying.

No one's going to break a sweat elbowing his or her way into church for white handkerchiefs. It's not a tame Jesus that people are craving. They want the genuine undomesticated Savior, the One who loves fiercely and speaks sharply, who looks us in the eye and speaks to us of God's uncompromising love, who startles us with more forgiveness than we think we deserve, who challenges us to extend the same to others. They want the Jesus who commands us to love enemies, serve the poor and see ourselves in the stranger. They want the Jesus who makes them cry in church—not out of sadness, but because after long years of trying everything else, they've brushed up against him and felt something inside begin to heal, and love reawakening when they thought it was gone for good.

What do we inside the church have to push through in order to find our way back to that Jesus? What do we have to set aside so that people who come into contact with us can sense his irresistible pull on their lives, calling them to discipleship, calling them to joy?

Maybe the mainline isn't dead but only sleeping. Maybe we only need to get out of the way so Jesus can get in. He's waiting and longing for us to throw off all constraints and obey only our need for him. He hopes we'll refuse to take no for an answer.