

Stay and follow: Psalm 22: 19-28; Luke 8: 26-39

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [June 3, 1998](#) issue

He was buried alive, this man of the Gerasenes. He was alive, but he lived in a graveyard among the tombs. Modern interpreters tell us that the people possessed by demons in the Gospels probably suffered from forms of mental illness.

Some mental illnesses can be effectively treated, others cannot. Many people suffer from depression, for example, but with a little medication can function quite well as a physician, accountant, pastor or father. Others are possessed by what seems to be a legion of demons. What afflicts them is difficult to manage. Regular living proves overwhelming, and finally a family decides to force the afflicted one out of normal society and into institutions created to house the mentally ill. The Gerasenes' mental institution was the village graveyard.

Jesus always seems to find those who have been separated from the community. Luke tells us story after story of how Jesus encounters someone who lives outside the covenant community, removes what separates them and then sends them back home where they've longed to be.

Because Jesus has no fear of being ritually contaminated, because he seems to have absolutely no fear of becoming an outcast himself, Jesus often ministers along the margins of society. There he finds the lepers hiding, the blind begging, the possessed raging and the sinful cowering. The gift Jesus brings to those on the margins is to take away the things that separate them and restore them to the heart of the community.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is yet another one of these healing, restoration stories, but this one has a few intriguing details. Although the detail of the death of the pigs is odd, the best part is the second half, when the townspeople find the former mental patient sitting at the feet of Jesus.

The people have already heard the account of the healing from the herdsmen. They are not amazed or grateful, but afraid. Not knowing what to make of it and not sure they want to hear more, they insist that Jesus leave their neighborhood at once. Jesus, with his "shake the dust off your feet" evangelism philosophy, gets back into

the boat without a word and prepares to set sail.

Then it happens. The man who sat at Jesus' feet and who learned from him wants to go with them. Look at his options! He is standing on the beach with Jesus, with the disciples in the boat in front of him and the townsfolk who banished him to the graveyard at his back. He wants to go with the one who healed him, the one who wasn't afraid to come near him, who didn't walk on the other side of the street. He wants to go with his new teacher and Lord and learn more about the kingdom of God. He's ready to follow Jesus. There's room in the boat, and he'll leave without looking back--there's no one to say good-bye to. But Jesus says no.

To others along the way Jesus issues the invitation, "Come, follow me," but to this one he says, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." At the very end, we see what kind of story this really is. It isn't simply a story of one man's healing, but a story of one man's calling. Jesus does bid the man to follow, but in this case the following, the call to ministry, involves staying rather than leaving. Jesus does not reject the man's application for discipleship, but accepts it fully. I even have a first appointment all lined up for you, Jesus says from the boat. Your congregation is standing right behind you. Now, go and tell. The Gerasene demoniac is ordained the first Gerasene preacher. According to Luke's one-liner at the end of the story, the man fulfills his task and does it well.

The disciples, those official ones named in scripture, are silent during this account of restoration and call. Do they understand that this nameless man is as much a disciple as they, who one day will have churches named after them? Though Jesus says, "Come" to some and "Stay" to others, do they understand that all are called to follow--with different assignments? Do they realize that he is the only person in the village with enough clout to preach the Jesus story? After all, who can understand the coming power of the resurrection better than someone who has lived as a dead man but is now alive in Christ?

Our God, who is constantly in the process of reshaping the community, issues a variety of calls in a variety of places. No matter where we are sent or what we are called to do, each of us is a disciple of Christ and equal member of the one body. When we are called, where we are called and how we are called are part of God's great design. The Gerasene preacher desperately wants his call to take him far, far away, but Jesus says, "Stay."

We wonder what he is thinking as he turns away from the boat and faces the fearful crowd, the men, women and children of his new congregation. Perhaps as he leads them back to the village he sings the verses of Psalm 22: *Be not far away, O Lord; you are my strength; hasten to help me. I will declare your name to the people; in the midst of [even this] congregation will I praise you.*