

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE FREEDOM TO TELL OTHERS

Mark 5:1-20

I think it is safe to say that not many of us – if any of us – have a conversion story nearly as dramatic as this demon-possessed man in Mark 5 who had a life-changing encounter with the Lord Jesus. That is OK, because it is not the drama of the change in a person's life that matters nearly so much as the reality of the change that takes place when we meet Jesus and experience the wonder of His saving grace in our lives. You may or may not have a dramatic story to tell, but if your faith in Christ is real, then you have been raised from a state of spiritual deadness to new life in Him. Once we were all objects of God's wrath (Ephesians 2:4), but now in Christ we are trophies of His grace. And that is a dramatic change!

What happened to this demon-possessed man is an example of what takes place when a person meets Jesus, because Jesus is in the business of changing lives. You don't meet Jesus face-to-face and stay the same. You can't experience the touch of His amazing grace and remain unchanged. Jesus makes things happen. He made things happen during the time of His incarnation. And He still makes things happen today.

Consider a few examples of His life-changing power:

Zaccheus was an enterprising and successful but dishonest businessman, a wealthy tax-collector who was about as popular in his day as an AIG executive today. Everybody looked down on him as a "sinner." But then he met Jesus. And Zaccheus became a changed man. He changed the way he did business, because Jesus changed his heart. Salvation came to Zaccheus' house, because Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:9-10).

Jesus met a woman at Jacob's well near the Samaritan town of Sychar, and talked with her about living water, the kind of water that wells up to eternal life. (See John 4:1-42.) This woman had been married five times, and was living with yet another man. But Jesus saw beyond her sinfulness, beyond her moral failings, to her spiritual thirst. He recognized her longing for the truth, for cleansing from sin, for peace, for a right relationship with God. And He changed her life. He set her free from her sin.

Do you remember what she did then? She went back into town and told everyone about Jesus. The result? Many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the woman's testimony. They went out to meet Jesus, and they said to the woman: "We no longer believe just because of what you said. Now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (John 4:39-42).

Jesus met a blind beggar named Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52) and restored his sight. Do you know what Bartimaeus did next? No, he didn't go to Disney World. The Bible says: "Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road" (Mark 10:52). When

he could see again, when everything came into focus, he followed Jesus. Which is the only reasonable thing to do when Jesus changes your life.

A man named Saul had an unexpected encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, where he was headed to persecute the followers of Jesus, and the result was that Christianity's most ardent opponent became its greatest missionary. Jesus changes lives.

Closer to our own day, a British scholar of medieval literature named C. S. Lewis came to faith in Christ and was, as he put it, surprised by joy. In his book *Surprised by Joy*, he describes his initial conversion from atheism to a belief in God, which set the stage for his eventual conversion to the Christian faith two years later. Listen to Lewis' own words:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen (Magdalen College, which was part of Oxford University), night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him of whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 (May 22), I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed, perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape? ... The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compassion is our liberation.”

Eventually, Lewis' dejection would turn to joy and his reluctance would be replaced by a wholehearted embrace of the saving power of Jesus Christ. And, through his writings, Lewis has been used by God to point multitudes of unbelievers to Christ, and to explain why it makes sense to believe in Him.

Anne Rice is one of the most widely read authors in the world today. Best known for a series of novels called *The Vampire Chronicles*, her books have sold nearly 100 million copies. After spending most of her adult life as a self-described atheist, she came to faith in Christ several years ago. Since her conversion she has written a series of historical novels chronicling the life of Jesus. Though her journey may have been markedly different from yours or mine, Anne Rice met Jesus, and He changed her life.

Jim Vaus met Jesus, too, and Jesus changed his life. Vaus was a wire-tapping and electronics expert in Los Angeles who went to work for the Mob in the late 1940s. I recently read a biography of Vaus written by his son Will, entitled *My Father Was a Gangster*. Jim Vaus' life changed dramatically in 1949 when he and his wife wandered into a revival service in a huge tent in LA where Billy Graham was preaching. That day Jim Vaus gave “the tangled mess of (his) life” to God and put his trust in the saving power of Jesus Christ. It was the end of his days as a gangster, but the beginning of a new life devoted to telling others about Jesus.

Here is the point: When you meet Jesus and experience His grace in your life, when you come to know who He is, what He has done for you and how much you matter to Him, you

cannot remain the same. Jesus is in the business of changing lives. And He has given us the task, the privilege, the freedom to tell others about His life-changing power.

There is no doubt Jesus changed the life of this demon-possessed man in Mark 5. At the end of Mark 4, we see Jesus exercising His power over the forces of nature by calming the storm out on the Sea of Galilee. “Even the wind and the waves obey Him!” the disciples exclaimed. They were amazed by His power. Then, in chapter 5, we see Jesus demonstrating His power over the forces of evil, His power to change lives from the inside out. Which is even more amazing, don’t you think?

From a human point of view, this man was a lost cause. Rehabilitation was out of the question. The evil spirit said his name was “Legion.” In the Roman army, a legion consisted of over 6,000 men. Thousands of evil spirits were occupying and controlling this man’s life. The situation was hopeless. He was a danger to others, and a danger to himself.

Satan had him right where he wanted him. He had made him into a hopeless, helpless, hapless, half-shackled wild man. You know what? Satan would do the same thing to you and me, if he could.

Because no one could keep him under control, this man was driven from society. He was banished. Cut off from family and community. He was sentenced to live in a graveyard among the dead. But then Jesus entered the picture.

Jesus knew that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put this man’s wrecked life back together again. He knew that a government program – or even a bailout – wasn’t the answer. The best education in the world couldn’t solve his problem. His life had come unraveled at the seams. Only Jesus could fix what was wrong with him. Only Jesus could put the broken pieces of his life back together again. Only Jesus could restore him to his right mind. Only Jesus could make him whole. Only Jesus could save him from destroying himself. Only Jesus.

What happened when Jesus entered this man’s life? Before he met Jesus he was crazy and out of control. After he met Jesus he was calm. He was sitting with Jesus, dressed and in his right mind. The change in his life was startling. No one could miss it.

Jesus still has that kind of life-changing power today. He is still in the business of changing lives. He can put the pieces of a wounded or broken marriage back together. He can bring a prodigal home. He can heal the deep wounds that bring pain and heartache to our lives and families. He can give us the grace and strength we need to face the unrelenting pressures and challenges of life. If I may coin a phrase: Yes, He can. And He does!

As I look at my own life, the older I get, the more amazed I am at what God has done in me and for me in the power of His grace. He has changed my life. He continues to change my life. He continues to enrich and sustain my life with His grace. Day by day He gives me strength for today and hope for tomorrow. He allows me to speak and to serve others in His name. Even when life seems hard, I know I am richly blessed. And all the praise goes to Him.

When you meet Jesus and He changes your life, what does Jesus want you to do? He wants you to go and tell others what he has done for you. This man whose life was radically changed by Jesus wanted to stay with Him. He wanted to join the band of disciples who traveled with Jesus. But Jesus said no. Instead, He told him to go back home, to return to his family and friends and neighbors, and to tell them what Jesus had done in his life. Jesus wanted him to be a living, breathing, walking, talking witness to the power of the Son of God to change lives.

Jesus wants you and me to do the same thing. He has given us the freedom – even more, the privilege and mission in life – to tell others what the Lord has done for us, and what He can do in their lives as well.

Here are four simple suggestions to follow as we carry out our mission to tell others about Jesus:

1. *Be prepared.* 1 Peter 3:15 says: “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have (in Christ).” Just like Boy Scouts, God wants us to always be prepared when an opportunity arises to tell someone about Jesus and His love.

2. *Be intentional.* Ask God to develop in you an evangelistic mindset – a way of thinking that discerns witnessing opportunities. Make it your intention not only to recognize but to take hold of those opportunities God gives you.

3. *Be clear.* Don’t be vague in your testimony to the person and work of the Lord Jesus in your life. Be specific about what Jesus has done in your life. Make the gospel clear, not fuzzy or complicated.

4. *Be winsome.* After Peter urges us to “always be prepared” to tell others about the hope we have in Christ, he says: “But do this with gentleness and respect.” Gentleness and respect. Not many people are successfully argued or bullied into the kingdom of God. Many more will be won to Christ if our manner is consistent with our message. A message of God’s grace and love should be communicated with love and grace. And with humility.

Do not underestimate the power of Jesus to change lives. Praise God for His life-changing power in your life. Exercise your freedom and privilege to tell others about His saving love and power.

Be prepared. Be intentional. Be clear. And be winsome. Let God use you and your witness to point others to Him. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.