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What if...Tenderness is the Only Path to Mutual Transformation
July 24, 2022

Mark 5: 1-20

They came to the other side of the sea, to the region of the Gerasenes.^[a] ² And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.

³ He lived among the tombs, and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain, ⁴ for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces, and no one had the strength to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.

⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him, ⁷ and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me."

⁸ For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"

⁹ Then Jesus^[b] asked him, "What is your name?"

He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many." ¹⁰ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the region. ¹¹ Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding, ¹² and the unclean spirits^[c] begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." ¹³ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine, and the herd, numbering about two thousand, stampeded down the steep bank into the sea and were drowned in the sea.

¹⁴ The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵ They came to Jesus and saw the man possessed by demons sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion, and they became frightened.

¹⁶ Those who had seen what had happened to the man possessed by demons and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷ Then they began to beg Jesus^[d] to leave their neighborhood. ¹⁸ As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹ But Jesus^[e] refused and said to him, "Go home to your own people, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you." ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed.

Before I sent up to Chautauqua for few days,
I'd had an encounter with a man that had seared me.
 was on our patio,
 and was, clearly very unwell,
 but he would not go to the safe place

*Its not safe for you here, and its not safe for people
to be around you.*

I tried to say it with both clarity and compassion, but
 he left, pretty angry.
 and I didn't know where he was,
 and I was wretched.

I went up to Chautauqua
 to hear and see Fr. Gregory Boyle who founded Homeboy

Industries, who gives people jobs and hope
and community,
helping thousands of people
find a way out of gang life
and the cycle of incarceration

Fr. Boyle spoke of Meister Eckart,
a Dominican priest of the 13th century Germany
who countered the prevalent image of an angry
vindictive, violent God, saying:
any talk of God that doesn't comfort you is a lie.
God is love, and we all receive the tender glance of God

Fr Greg spoke of Ignacius of Loyola, a Spanish Priest in the 1400s
and the word Ignacius used describe how God looks at us:
Accciamento, to look with attention,
with "affectionate awe."

We know that God looks at us this way,
because we meet Jesus in these stories
and nowhere more powerfully than this one
told by Mark and Luke,

Jesus has crossed over the sea of Galilee
This is not his home turf, these are not his homies.
The whole purpose of this trip,
seems to find this man who lives among the tombs,
and inflicts harm upon himself
They have tried chaining him,
locking him up, like we tend to do here,

but he gets out of those chains
and hurts himself even more.

*"What have you do to with me, Jesus of Nazareth,
don't torment me"
with your words of hope and love and peace,
there is no peace,
and you can't possibly love me
and I know you can't help me.
we are legion, there's too much.
it's all too much.*

there are so many who feel this way,
whose pain and inner doubts, borne of trauma,
where no one soothed their pain,
and now they cannot do this for themselves

I spent a long time yesterday with a person,
borne into brokenness, who lashed out at me,
and my words of love and support,
seemed to him, taunting.

It took everything in me to stay the course,
it is scary to face the swirling struggle in someone.
in my own self, .
to transform my frustration at brokenness
into tenderness for the broken one.

Fr. Boyle brings members of his team with him,
Homeboys, or homies, they call one another,

and one time he brought Raul.
Saul had done 12 years in prison, he'd suffered a lot,
and was working in the bakery
and Fr. said, *come on with me to Boston.*
and he teared up, and blessed him

One afternoon, Father Boyle told us
Saul, had gone off to look around the city
and was taking a picture of himself by an historic courthouse,
and some feet from him there was a little bench,
and two older, unhoused men,
were sitting there.

One guy says, *Don't take my picture,*
who told you could take my picture.
and the other guy says,
Relax, he's just taking a selfie,
but he continues to rant, .

And Fr. Boyle says that Saul,
rather than backing away from the hostility,
approaches it. and looks at these two men and says,.
Hi, my name is Saul, I'm from Los Angeles.

I don't care where you are from, don't take my picture,
and the other man says,
Don't mind us, we're crazy.

And Saul extends his hand to the one who was screaming
and says, *That's okay, I'm crazy, too.*

and he finds out that the guy's name is Louie,
and the other man is Bill,
and they talk for some time.

Finally, its time for Saul to leave.

and the one who was yelling, says, now
in a different tone and stillness.

He says, *Saul, I've lived my whole life in Boston,
you need directions or something?*

*Saul had crossed the seas, had looked upon the broken man
with affectionate awe,
Louis felt seen and cherished, held and carried.
It was the comfort of the God of all comfort.*

Jesus is standing
in the lowly place, says Ignacius of Loyola,
*Not outside the area pointing to it, but **in** the lowly place*

And Fr. Boyle elaborates:

*he is serenely standing there with the poor, the powerless,
the voiceless, whose dignity has been denied,
with the easily despised and the readily left out,
he is standing with the demonized
so the demonizing will stop.
and with the disposable,
so the day will come
when we stop throwing
people away.*

He is there not so much
to comfort the poor in their powerlessness.
But a comfort that reminds them of their power,
a comfort that holds and carries us all.

No, you don't come with me,
Jesus says to the man who was now well,
*but go and tell the people in your own place
what the Lord has done for you,
what mercies God has shown you.*

God looks at us with affectionate awe,
looks at you
looks at the person in your life who is struggling
in ways you can't seem to fix,
with affectionate awe
knowing we all want to be well

To believe this, to practice this, changes us, too.

A homeboy named Raul told Father Boyle,
"What happened to me yesterday
never happened to me before.
The train was packed but he was able to get a seat
and there was an older guy, a homie, a little drunk,
and he sees the sweatshirt, and says,
You work at Homeboy, is it any good?
and Raul says, *It helped me,*

*in fact, I don't think I'm every going back to prison
because of this place,*

And Raul stands, and asks the guy his name,
and he pulls out. piece of paper and
writes down the address of Homeboy Industries.
and he looks him in the eye and says,
Come see us, we'll help you.
and the man said gently, *thank you.*
and then gets off

Raul sits down.

*What happens to me next, he told Fr. Boyle
has never happened to me before,
Everyone on the train was staring at me,
was nodding at me,
Everyone on the train was smiling at me,
and for the first time in my life,
I was admired.*

What if tenderness is the only way to mutual transformation....

The whole world is barricaded, says Fr. Boyle

What if the only thing that can scale that wall is tenderness.

I am so grateful to be there, with them,
and among this community where we are learning to
practice that tenderness
that affectionate awe.

Some, I hope most of you have received a letter that informs you

that the church was the victim of a
sophisticated business email compromise
that resulted in loss of money.

We had a meeting with leaders on Wednesday,
and shared what happened,
and what we have done and are doing about it,
and the question came quickly:

How do we help other churches not experience this
and folks were gratified to hear that we are working on that.

The wound moved so quickly to compassion,
to tenderness for others,
and my gaze upon those gathered turned to affectionate awe.

And I hope that when our friend comes back to the patio,
that will be my gaze,
and I will remember that he wants to be well,
and that God is a God of comfort,
and infinite tenderness,
who, if we allow it,
will bring forth that goodness in us.
May it be so. Amen.