

Complications
Luke 8:26-39
June 19, 2022
First Presbyterian, Luling

We use the word “complications” to indicate something bad, usually. Complications of pregnancy are never good. Surgical complications are also not something you want to hear. Using “It’s complicated” to describe a relationship usually means that things are not going well. We’d prefer to keep things simple. I read an article this week by someone who gets rid of one garment every time they buy a new one. Same thing with shoes. And books. They don’t want to accumulate stuff. They don’t want their life to get any more complicated than it is already. Simple is good.

Simple is good. And complicated is not inherently bad. It often just is complicated, just the way life is. We can make choices and decisions to simplify in those areas we control, but in the 98% of life that we don’t control, well, it gets complicated. I made up that number, but it seems pretty accurate to me. 98% of our life is out of our control and thus, complicated.

This story from Luke is full of complications. Every little piece of it gets more and more complicated the more you look at it. It turns out that this is one of those stories I’ve never preached on, and now that I’ve looked at it closely this week, it could probably have a half dozen sermons. I’ll try to keep it to one.

First, the location. Across the Sea of Galilee from where they were. Not a big deal. But wait, it’s more complicated than that. This is the first time in Luke that Jesus has entered non-Jewish territory. He’s encountered non-Jewish people before, but this place is different than he’s been before. There isn’t a crowd to welcome him or follow him around. His reputation has not preceded him, or if it has, nobody has been overly impressed with his accomplishments. So he’s off of his home turf.

Also, it seems entirely feasible that Jesus is alone throughout this encounter. It sounds a whole lot like the disciples stayed in the boat. In the passage immediately before this, Jesus had calmed the storm. Then “they” arrive on this side of the Sea, but “he” steps out onto the land. The disciples don’t appear in any of the interaction and don’t seem to be the audience.

Immediately, Jesus encounters this tormented and tortured man. He’s unclothed, living among the tombs. That seems bad enough. But there are more complications here, too. The tombs are ritually unclean, because they have to do

with death. Unclothed people are ritually unclean. And he's clearly and tragically possessed by an unclean spirit. The townspeople have tried to keep him safe, tried to keep themselves safe, by locking him up in shackles, but the spirit breaks the chains and drives him out to the place of burial. It's complicated for the townspeople. What are they supposed to do with him? He's dangerous. This is not something they can control, though their chains and shackles are evidence that they've tried. Someone must be bringing him food, so he can survive. They don't have any good choices.

Immediately the man speaks to Jesus, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." This seems like an expected thing for a demon to say. Demons wouldn't want Jesus to mess with them, right? But it's more complicated than that. First, the demon knows Jesus by name, knows that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God. The disciples, just a few verses before, have not known what to think about who Jesus is, after he the wind and waves obey him. But this demon knows exactly who Jesus is, and how powerful he is. And the unclean spirit is afraid.

Oh, but it's even more complicated than that. Because it's not just one unclean spirit. It's plural. Demons. This poor soul is imprisoned and tortured by Legion. The people of Jesus's day and Luke's day knew only one reference for the word Legion: a legion of Roman soldiers, somewhere around 5-6000 troops in this group of soldiers. 5000 demons tormenting this one man, as the Roman Empire occupied and tormented the land of Israel.

Jesus, as always, values the healing of people who are hurting. And so he prepares to cast this legion of demons out of the tormented man. Demons don't like things to be simple. They start negotiating with Jesus. Even more astonishing, he lets them! They don't want to be thrown into the abyss, what Revelation calls "the bottomless pit." So they look around and spot the pigs. Cast us into the pigs, that's their suggestion. So Jesus does. And then the pigs run into the sea and drown.

The pigs, I should point out, are also unclean. Not kosher. Jewish people would not have had a herd of pigs. The unclean spirits into the unclean pigs into the bottomless abyss. Seems like an easy wrap up to this man's problem.

But those pigs belonged to someone. A pig owner is somewhere in the town, extremely upset at Jesus for destroying his income for probably the entire year. Healing the one man, saving the one man, ruined another's livelihood. And in turn ruined all of the livelihoods that were dependent on that pig owner spending money in their shops and for their goods and services. No wonder they

ask Jesus to leave town and don't let the door hit you on the way out, Jesus.

The man is healed. He kneels at Jesus's feet. He wants to follow Jesus. That seems simple enough, right? He could join the band of disciples, the crowds that seemed to follow Jesus every place but this place. But no. It's complicated. Jesus wants him to stay put, to be a witness to Jesus's power in this place. That can't be an easy task for him, to rebuild a life where his had been destroyed. But he does as Jesus requires.

Life is complicated. This man's life is complicated, and being healed and saved doesn't simplify it at all. It's still complicated.

Jesus doesn't promise us simple. Complications can be part of our healing, part of our calling, part of being faithful disciples. What if we embrace the complications as places to meet Jesus?