

Every time I drive to Richmond something catches my eye. Of course, I relish in the beautiful surroundings of route 522 and enjoy the rolling hills and changing foliage. This week I saw something that I see on every trip to my parents' house, but for some reason this time it really got to me. As you drive down the windy country road before you reach interstate 64 there is a sign that reads: "Dog Killer Next Store." Now I know there is a story behind this sign. I know that there may in fact be a dog killer who lives next store to this sign, but seeing this sign does something to me... it breaks my heart because it is embodied hatred.

Every time I drive down this road, I start hoping...hoping that this sign will be taken down. Hoping that forgiveness can overcome hate. To me this sign embodies a chain, a chain holding someone back from moving forward with their life, even after a great loss.

We all have chains in our lives...the things that hold us back from the people God has called us to be. For some of us these chains are invisible. They take on the form of regrets from the past, our fears, our hatred, our shame or our pride. People may not know we are chained up at all.

For some of us, these chains may be visible. It may be the tear that is shed when someone else is watching, or the stress we carry on our faces. It may be the missed phone calls or family gatherings. We are all chained up by something at some point in our lives, because this is what sin does to us. It takes root in our hearts and makes us forget who we are and what we are called to do.

This is why we need Jesus Christ: the chain breaker.

In our Scripture from Galatians and the Gospel of Luke we hear that Jesus Christ is the one who breaks all our chains and sets us free.

In the Gospel of Luke, we hear a story about a man named Legion who literally knew what it was like to be chained up. You see he was consumed by many demons, so much so that in caring for him, his loved ones would chain him up so that he would not hurt himself or others.

The demons inside of him were so strong that he would break through the shackles and run away into the wild. He did not spend time in the company of friends and family, he spent his time among the dead away from everyone else. In this place it seemed that he found some respite, somehow knowing that he was not able to function normally in society.

Legion was suffering in mind, body, and spirit. His life was not his own. He had lost all control and for him the future seemed bleak. In the various Scripture about people possessed by demons in the Bible, Pastor Michael Rogness, shows us that these people have three things in common: "they cause self-destructive behavior in the victim, the victim feels trapped in that condition, and they separate the victim from normal living in the family circle."ⁱ

Wow. Haven't we all felt like this at some point in our lives, or journeyed with someone who did? We know what it feels like to feel this way, because this is how being consumed by sin makes us feel.

There are still demons at work in the world today, they simply take on different forms.

Have you ever looked into the hollow eyes of someone with an addiction? After a while their addictions consumes them, and it seems like the person we knew before is gone. Have you ever had depression or journeyed with someone suffering from depression? This mental disease acts like a demon, as it robs people of joy and the realities of truth before them, making them believe the lies that they are not good enough or that no one cares.

At some point we all feel trapped in the demons of our own sin, not able to free ourselves. This is why we need God.

What is interesting about our Scripture for today, is that even though Legion was consumed with many demons, he still recognized Jesus Christ. This is a hopeful reminder for us, that even in the midst of our struggle with sin, we can still recognize that Christ is at work in our lives.

Also we know that Legion wanted to be healed. From the moment Jesus stepped onto dry land Legion was there to confront him. This may have been an uncomfortable confrontation as Legion is described as wearing no clothes, and in Mark's gospel (Mark 5), he is described as having much physical harm to his body done by himself.

What is interesting is that Jesus does not immediately cast the demons out of him, Jesus first asks him, "What is your name?" This is such a simple question, yet it shows us how Christ enters into a relationship with us that is personal. Christ takes the time to look beyond eyes that are hallow and see our souls.

Christ did not see Legion as a problem, he saw him as a person in need of healing. He cast the demons out of him into a herd of swine who then ran off the mountain and drowned.

This man who had suffered from so many demons was finally free. In that moment, Legion regained his life. He had control of his mind, he put some clothes on and he was ready to go and follow Jesus, in fact, he wanted to go with him. What an amazing example of faith!

Jesus told him to stay where he was and evangelize in his town and be reconnected with his family.

Jesus Christ was his chain breaker. In that moment of healing Legion regained his hope about the future and found reconciliation with his family. What an amazing God we serve!

Christ is still breaking down chains today. Over this past week at Annual Conference I have seen Christ the chain breaker at work. Delegates were chosen that embody Christ’s inclusive love. Petitions were passed that will start the work to break down walls of hatred and fear among us.

But...as we voted on delegates to General and Jurisdictional Conference and the various motions and petitions, it was easy to tell that there was tension among us. As a church we were divided. The clergy and laity were frustrated because they wanted their side to “win.” Then something amazing happened.

At the very last service of the day we were having closing worship where Bishop Weaver was to preach. A little girl, maybe eight years old came up to read the scripture. She started to read, but then looked up out into the crowd of 2,000 people. Then in fear she began to cry. She told her mom she could not do it.

People responded immediately, “We love you” from the crowd and other encouraging words. Bishop Weaver having mercy on this little girl began to read the scripture for her as she stood there crying. Then, as the Spirit moved across the room, everyone, unprompted, began to read along too, all of our voices weaving together so this girl, so no one, stood alone, all reading that great commission to “Go.” It was truly one of most unforgettable things I have ever experienced. I could not stop crying. In this moment I was reminded that we are not called to be divided. We are not called to embody hatred and frustration. We are called to be united and embody the love of Christ and take part in His healing ministry.

It was very moving for me at the end of the service to look into so many eyes of my brothers and sisters in Christ as I gave communion to many of my friends and strangers alike. On our own we cannot find common group with each other; it is Christ who unites us.

In our Scripture from Galatians 3:27-28, we hear more about Christ who unites us: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ broke many chains. He broke through the chains that separate us. Christ does not call us to be divided, but to be one in Christ Jesus. We are one in Christ Jesus when we treat other people the way that Christ treated us. When we do not define others by any outside entity or appearance, but when start a relationship with them by asking them their name.

We are one in Christ Jesus when we bond together with our brothers and sisters in Christ and continue Christ's chain breaking work.

The good news for our lives today is that Christ is breaking down the chains of sin and evil every day and we are called to be part of this chain-breaking work.

I have seen the community of Culpeper become a part of Christ's chain breaking work. Many families who experienced the affects of addiction, whose loved ones died because of this disease, were fed up with the evils caused by heroin. They had tried to combat drug trafficking in their community but realized that by themselves they were not making much headway.

So, coming from different backgrounds, and having different stories, they came together for a common purpose, to save the lives of the people in Culpeper Community. Instead of thinking their way or 501c3 was the best way, they came together to vision. They worked with the police and one another agencies, they worked with local churches, and together they are having a profound impact, they are saving peoples lives.

Church, people's lives are in jeopardy and we are called to bond together and offer others the new life that only Christ brings. We are called to journey alongside people who suffer from addiction, and depression, and anything else that enchains them.

We are called to journey alongside people who are different than us, people we may be afraid of or not understand all for the glory of God because together we can do more for the kingdom.

What chains are holding you back in your life? How will you surrender and let Christ break down these chains and set you free?

What chains have you been called to help break down in the life of your family or this community?

May we continue to be a part of Christ’s ministry of breaking down the chains of sin so that we can all be free and live lives “worthy of the calling of Jesus Christ our Lord.” In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1719