



**SUNNYVALE**

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*From the Pulpit*

Sermon: "I Love to Tell the Story"

The Rev. Karin Kennedy Hejmanowski ~ June 20, 2010

Luke 8:26-39

Psalm 42:1-11

It was 1975. Saigon had just fallen. Many of you remember it much better and much more vividly than I. I was a very young child. And I understood it as a young child—the immensity and the implications and the hardship of the previous years were beyond my understanding or my care at such a young age. Many of my dad's Army contemporaries had rotated to the war zone. But that was before my time.

We lived in Seattle by now. My mom always wanted my brother and me to be exposed to people of different ethnicities and different cultures, so we hosted missionaries, guest speakers, foreign students, and other such guests.

Then one day there was a sort of ad in the local newspaper. There were refugees coming from Viet Nam. In the chaos of the fall, these people had fled their country with little or nothing. They had watched their homeland overtaken. They were on the losing side of the war. They had seen things no one should see. Some had been in re-education camps. Many had left home and family, wealth and position. The ad was asking for Americans to take them in, to sponsor them, to be

their best friends for a time. People to help them transition to life in America. To help them resettle. Find schools. Learn English. Learn to use a washing machine and dryer—nothing would dry on lines in Seattle! Learn to drive. Learn to shop in our markets. Find jobs. Find life again.

So my mom responded. She called and was told that there would be some families coming to Washington State on such and such a date and we could come and see them and pick a family. My mom was repulsed by the idea of looking at families and choosing one over the others and so asked that they just assign us a family that had children the age of my brother and me.

And that is how we met Mr. Phuoc, his wife, Thong, and sons Trach & Thao. In the months and years to come they taught us as much as we taught them. As did their relatives who followed. And their friends. And their friends' relatives.

The stories from those early days are repeated in our family from time to time. Because they're worth telling. Because they formed who we were becoming. And who they were becoming. For example, there was the time we showed up, our pastor in tow, for dinner at their house on the wrong day—KFC to the rescue! The time my dad strongly reprimanded Thao for licking the dripping syrup off the syrup bottle. The time my brother and I completely thought Thao was kidding that we were eating pigs' ears. And so many more.

God entwined our lives and the stories are worth telling because each reveals a piece of our family story was entwined in God's bigger story. And they're the beginning of the story of my mom finding her life passion in helping resettle refugees—a work she's still doing these 35 years later. They're worth telling because they allow God's grace to shine through. And so they're stories we love to tell.

The man in our story today had a story that he must have told for the rest of his life. A story he must have loved to tell! It was so unbelievable that his story must have kept his listeners in rapt attention. But as he told it again and again, it wasn't to the audience he had originally hoped. But it helps to go back to the beginning of the story.

Jesus arrives in this region where this man lives. He has just been in a boat with the disciples where they feared for their lives because of the waves and the wind—rough conditions even for experienced fishermen, as many of them were. They were amazed when Jesus spoke and calmed the storm—he was able to even tell nature what to do.

So then they land and get out of the boat. And they're met by a man who is absolutely out of control. The text says it's because of demons that caused him to have such behavior. In fact, it appears that the town had created some of their identity around this man. They put a lot of energy in trying to restrain and confine him. He lived among the tombs—he didn't have a house and didn't live in community. The community probably thought they would be better off if he were dead...but at least he lived among the dead. At least he was somewhat contained.

Jesus came to the area. It was his first trip to a gentile area. Good Jews didn't go to gentile areas. They went around them at almost any cost. But Jesus landed and came on shore. And there to greet him was not the person by whom the town would most want to be represented. It was him. He's not named. He didn't need a name. He was the one possessed by the demons. He was the wild man with legendary strength and unkept hair and no clothes.

The man approached Jesus and it seems those spirits inhabiting him recognized Jesus right away. How can evil not know when it is in the presence of holiness.

They named Jesus. And they clearly knew his power. They knew they were about to be made homeless. They knew there was no fighting it, so rather than trying to, instead they tried to request their next home. Rather than go into the abyss, whatever that was in their experience, they asked to go into the herd of swine. And Jesus, gracious even in this situation, agreed. And so into the herd they went. And immediately the herd ran off and off the cliff and into the sea. Pigs aren't swimming animals, so if the fall weren't enough, the sea didn't bode well for them.

So that's all what it was, but it's only now that the real trouble begins. It would be easy to think that perhaps these were wild pigs and no one would miss them. There weren't likely animal rights groups monitoring the wild pig or hog population. But, as it turns out, it wasn't like that.

There were swineherds. They were responsible for the pigs. And imagine going to tell your boss that you just lost a whole herd of pigs. Because of demons! It seems that would be a harder sell than the old, "the dog ate my homework" bit. And yet it was true.

So there were swineherds. Which means that someone valued these pigs. In fact, they provided a livelihood for a good number of people. And food for many others. Jews don't eat pork, but these were gentiles...they did eat pork. This sudden reduction in supply almost certainly tipped the supply/demand scale and the cost of pork surely went up immediately in the area.

None of these were welcome changes.

Except to *him*. He was better. Finally he was in his right mind. Finally he could feel . . . human. Finally things might be okay. Maybe he would find friends. Maybe. Maybe he would find a house to live in. Maybe. Or maybe he would forget this place and go follow Jesus!

The towns people were not only angry, they were afraid. What was this power? What else might he find and change in their town? Why was he changing life for them? They had learned to live with things the way they were and now this Jewish rabbi had come and changed everything. Without asking. There were no town meetings, no focus groups, no studies on what it would do the economy or the ambiance of their town. Nothing. He just swept in and did it. They were not happy. And they were afraid of what else he might do. And afraid of his power.

They asked him to leave. And true to form, Jesus left. He told his disciples to go where invited and to shake the dust of their feet and leave if they were not welcome. And the tension and the anger and the fear must have been palpable. We can step back and see that the changes were good and an innocent man was freed from the imprisonment of his whole self. But that's not what they saw. They knew how to contain him and deal with him. But they didn't know how to contain or deal with this rabbi that had such power. So at their request, Jesus prepared to take his leave.

But what about *him*??? What was he going to do? He was now the focus of all the change. He represented that things were no longer the same. He must have been able to feel their eyes on him. He must have wondered what he would do after this. Where would he live? Who would talk to him? Maybe before they would leave him plates of food...what would he eat now?

The answer was clear. He needed to follow the man who had released him from that which bound him. That's what Jesus does, you know. He releases us from that which binds us. And he needed to be with him. He didn't care that Jesus was going back to the land of the Jews. He would go there. He would figure out how to live there. It couldn't be worse than the last chapter of his life!

How disappointed he must have been when Jesus said no. When Jesus said that he needed to stay. How could he free him and then turn him away? How could he leave him there?

But Jesus left him with a task. The man was supposed to tell his story. Jesus told him to return to his home. He had to face those that knew him before the hard chapter. He had to ask to be allowed back in. They had to deal with this new situation. They had to deal with all it meant. How do they relate now? What do they talk about now that the years have changed them each so? How do they trust one another?

He was to go back home and declare how much God had done for him. Jesus wasn't interested in the glory. He didn't need people to know his name right now. He wanted to give glory to God. And so the man was supposed to tell his story.

Because it was that kind of story. It's the kind of story that you tell over and over again. It's the kind of story that is so life changing that you can't help but tell it again and again. To tell the family that was to receive him back. And tell it so that it became their story. So then they could tell it. About how the Jewish rabbi came for a visit and changed his life completely. And changed their town completely. And changed their economy. And all in such a brief visit.

Because a brief visit with Jesus can make a huge difference. You've probably had those moments. When you were in the midst of a dark chapter in your life and Jesus showed up. Maybe by sending a friend. By sending a note. Maybe by circumstances that so clearly had the fingerprints of a loving God. By things lining up in a way that it wasn't just coincidence.

Or maybe the way you got to be the encourager. You got to walk with someone on a path of sorrow or a path of joy. And the ways God worked were fantastic.

Or maybe it's the way God answered prayers. And you or we prayed for something and God answered in the way you hoped or in other ways that were not what you would have imagined, but every bit as gracious, whether hard or joyful.

That's the story. That's the story of Jesus coming into your life and into our lives and making a difference. It's a story worth telling again and again and again.

Because it points our eyes and our hearts once again to Jesus. And it ties us into the story of God. And that's the story we want to tell. God's story. And how our stories tie into God's story. And that's the story we love to tell. Amen.