

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 20, 2014**

TRANSFORMING POWER (2)

Mark 5:1-20

LOOKING BACK

Last Sunday I told you the story of Adriaan Vlok, a white South African government official from the era of apartheid – he was in charge of the government’s brutal police force – who experienced the transforming power of the gospel in his life. In his retirement, as a result of reading the New Testament Gospels, he was moved to go and seek the forgiveness of a black man named Frank Chikane, a former anti-apartheid leader whom members of Vlok’s police force, with his blessing, had tried unsuccessfully to kill. Not only did he ask Chikane to forgive him, he also assumed the role of a servant and washed the feet of his former enemy.

Only the power of the gospel could bring this about. Only the transforming power of God expressed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and His saving, forgiving, liberating love could ever make it happen.

Remember what Paul says in Romans 1:16? We looked at it last Sunday. He says: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, “ both Jews and non-Jews. Paul wants us to comprehend the extraordinary, unrivaled power of God demonstrated in the gospel, the good news of His saving love shown to us in Jesus Christ His Son.

In the 1st century, when Paul wrote these words, Rome was the epicenter of political, military, and economic power in the world. The Roman Empire dominated the world stage. The Romans built great roads and ruled vast territories. In terms of its influence and its military might, no other nation could compare with Rome. In terms of raw political power, the Roman emperor stood head and shoulders above everyone else.

And yet, Paul recognized that the Romans were powerless to change the human heart. Ray Stedman makes the point that Rome couldn’t rid the world of violence, corruption, and slavery. Despite its enormous power, Rome was powerless to change the stubborn, self-centered, sin-saturated hearts of men and women. The same holds true for America today. From the beginning of time up to this present moment, no earthly government or movement has ever had the power to do it. Only God. Only God has the power to do it. Only God.

Paul bears witness to this truth when he says: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the *dunamis* – the unstoppable power of God – for the salvation of everyone who believes.” The only power powerful enough to set us free from our sin and guilt, to reconcile sinful human beings to a holy God, to change our hearts, to make us clean on the inside, and to transform the whole of our lives – our beliefs, our values, our relationships, our ambitions, our goals, our sense of purpose and direction in life – is the power of God put on display in the gospel of His Son Jesus Christ, who, in His earthly life, suffering, death, and resurrection, did

for us what we could never do for ourselves. The sinless Son of God bore our sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24), so that, restored to a right relationship with God through faith in Him, we might live in the fullness of fellowship with Him in this life here and now, and for eternity.

Adriaan Vlok experienced the power of the gospel, which is the power of God, both to save and to transform his life.

CONVERSION OF A KLANSMAN

Today I want to tell you another story. It is the story of a man I am blessed to know personally. His name is Tom Tarrants. Some of you may know Tom through his work with the C. S. Lewis Institute, which he served as president from 1998 to 2010. Since 2010, he has continued to serve the Institute in a ministry focused on discipleship and teaching. Tom exudes kindness, gentleness, and, well, grace.

Tom was born and raised in the deep South, in Alabama. He was in high school during the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Tom vehemently opposed efforts to integrate public schools and universities. At the age of 21, he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, a full-fledged racist and anti-Semite, and was part of a terrorist group called the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a group described at the time by the FBI as the most violent right-wing terrorist organization in America. His heart was full of hate. In 1968, while planting a bomb at the home of a prominent Jewish businessman in Meridian, MS, Tom and a fellow White Knight were surprised by a police SWAT team. In the ensuing shoot-out, his partner was killed. Tom, with four gunshot wounds, was barely alive when they got him to the hospital. Miraculously, he survived.

When he recovered, Tom was convicted and sentenced to 30 years in the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchment. About six months into his sentence, Tom escaped from prison with a few other inmates. At their hideout, the escapees took turns keeping watch. A few days after the escape, one of the other escapees relieved Tom from his shift as the look-out about 30 minutes ahead of schedule. Moments later, gunfire erupted. The FBI had tracked them down. The man who replaced Tom at the look-out post was killed. Tom knew it should have been him.

Sent back to prison, Tom spent the next three years in solitary confinement in a 6x9 foot cell. To pass the time, he began to read voraciously. He continued to fuel his prejudice and hate by devouring Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and more about the Nazis. A breakthrough in his life came when he began to read classical Greek philosophy and then the New Testament Gospels. As the truth seeped into his mind and heart, the wall of hate he had built around himself began to crumble. After a few weeks of reading the Bible, Tom got down on his knees in his 6x9 foot cell and committed his life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Tom tells his story in his book *Conversion of a Klansman: The Story of a Former Ku Klux Klan Terrorist*, published in 1978. It is out of print, but you may be able to find a used copy somewhere, if you're interested in reading it. In the prologue to the book he wrote:

I was overcome with a sense of my sinfulness – not just for prejudice, hatred, and political violence, but for my whole life-style. All my life I had been living for myself – what pleased me, made me feel good, made me look good to others. The feelings, needs, desires of other people were always secondary to what I wanted. Indeed, the whole world revolved around me and this showed itself in the outward sins of my life.

As I came to see myself as I really was – as God saw me – I was crushed, and I wept bitterly. How hideous and wretched I was. Then, seeing my need so clearly and knowing there was only One who could meet it, I surrendered myself to the Lord Jesus Christ as fully as I knew how. A tremendous weight was lifted from me, and I began to feel at peace at last.

In his prison cell, locked away in solitary confinement, Tom experienced the power of the gospel and his life was transformed. He went on to renounce the Klan and all the racism and hatred it bred. Released from prison after serving eight years, Tom has devoted his life to serving Christ and sharing with others the transforming truth and power of the gospel, of which his own life is a dramatic, real-life example.

(Sources: Washington Post article by Carey Kinsolving, “*The Light Came On*” for *Klansman*, January 30, 1993; <http://kristieejackson.com/2011/01/25/testimony-tuesday-tom-tarrants-2/>; and www.sarges.com/NLS/Bios/TomTarrants.html.)

A MADMAN TRANSFORMED

I wouldn't try to equate Tom Tarrants' past with the story of the demon-possessed man who comes face-to-face with Jesus in Mark 5. It is interesting, though, that “demonic” is a word Tom himself has used to describe the Klan. It is interesting, too, that after having a personal encounter with Jesus – Tom, through reading the Gospels, and the madman in Mark 5, rushing up to confront Jesus as Jesus got out of the boat on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee – both Tom and this seemingly untamable “walking madhouse of a man” (5:15, *MSG*) underwent a dramatic, radical change.

We've looked at the change that took place in Tom's life. What about this poor soul who, until he met Jesus, was serving a sentence of his own, condemned to wander among the tombs, cut off from family and community and compassion and love? When he met Jesus, everything changed. His whole life changed. Which is what often happens when a person meets Jesus. When Tom Tarrants encountered Jesus, it revolutionized his life. That is the kind of effect Jesus can and does have: *revolutionary*. Jesus revolutionized the life of this tormented, demented wild man from whom He cast out a “legion” of demons. (A Roman legion consisted of as many as 6,000 foot soldiers and a cavalry of 120 men on horseback. Whether you take the word “legion” literally here or not, there is no question that this man's life had been overrun by an overwhelming demonic force, at least enough to send a herd of two thousand pigs stampeding over a cliff to their death.)

No longer was he tormented, fragmented, demented, out of control and uncontrollable, a danger to others and a danger to himself. No longer was he a beast who needed to be tamed (David Garland). No longer running wild, no longer naked, now we see him sitting quietly

and attentively, like a disciple, in the presence of Jesus, fully clothed. No longer crazed, no longer possessed by evil spirits out to destroy him, intent on eliminating every last trace of the image of God in him, now at last he is in his right mind.

And, now that he is in his right mind, what does he want to do? He wants to follow Jesus. Isn't that what everyone in their right mind wants to do? Isn't it really the sanest thing a person can do? When you see yourself as you really are, and you see Jesus as he really is, and you see the unchanging truth and unparalleled beauty of the gospel, how can you not want to give your life to Jesus, to trust Him as your Savior and Lord, and to live for Him as a fully devoted follower?

Having experienced the transforming power of Jesus, this formerly demon-possessed man wants to follow Jesus literally. Physically. He wants to stay with Jesus. He wants to go with Jesus wherever Jesus goes. His desire is so strong that he begs Jesus to let him go with Him. But Jesus has a different plan for him. A different mission. A more important mission. Jesus tells him to go back home, to go back to his family and friends. Jesus wants him to reconnect with the people who once were part of his life before the demons moved in and took over. Jesus commissions him to be a walking, talking advertisement of the gospel – to go home and tell everyone who will listen the life-changing good news of what the Lord has done for him. The good news Jesus commissions him to spread is not simply that a miracle has taken place in his life. The message he is to share with others is that the One who has done this miracle in his life is none other than the Lord – none other than God Himself.

The deliverance or healing of this man is a sign that God is at work. It is a sign that when Jesus acts, God acts. For Jesus is God. And, as Tom Tarrants discovered, He has the power both to save and to transform the most hardened, the most bitter, the most malicious sinner you can imagine.

IS THERE ANY LIFE JESUS CANNOT CHANGE?

There are other details and aspects of this encounter in Mark 5 that we could examine. Let me just point out two things. First, as radically unlike the demon-possessed man as we may think our lives to be, we may not be as different as we think. Though we bear no resemblance to him on the outside, the inside may be a different story. On the outside, we may appear to be perfectly normal, well-adjusted, coherent and in our right minds. We may be well-dressed, have a good job and a nice home, drive an expensive car, and have a family that makes a good impression on others. On the inside, though, we may be a war zone of conflicting desires. We may be locked in mortal combat with “a legion of cravings (and) destructive impulses” (Garland), with worldly lusts and addictions. We may have wounds in our hearts all the medications in the world can't heal. Maybe it is fear of some kind – fear of failure or rejection. Maybe it is prejudice, or anger, or the inability or unwillingness to forgive that continually eats away at your soul. Regardless of how you appear to others, on the inside you may be as messed up and as desperately in need as the madman who lived among the dead. C. S. Lewis described his own life before his conversion as “a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name,” he said, “was Legion” (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 226).

To whatever extent this may be true in your life, think about this: If Jesus could change the life of this poor, pitiful, demon-possessed man, is there any life He cannot change? If Jesus could change the life of a violent, radical racist like Tom Tarrants, is there any life He cannot change? The transforming power of the gospel demonstrated so dramatically in the lives of these two men can change our lives, too. It has changed my life. The longer I live, the more I discover what a chronic, miserable sinner I am, and what a great and gracious and all-sufficient Savior Jesus is. Jesus can change your life. Jesus has the power to transform the lives of people you care deeply about. Jesus has the power to transform the person or persons you think are the least likely to ever become Christians. Do not doubt His power to save and to transform lives today.

GO AND TELL

Second, if you have experienced His amazing grace in your life, if Jesus has changed your life, He wants you, like the former madman, to tell others what He has done for you. He wants you to tell your family and friends about the difference He has made in your life. You don't have to have a dramatic story. You just need to be willing. You need to make sure that God is the hero of your story, and not you.

The madman whom Jesus made whole did what Jesus told him to do. He went home. He even traveled around the region known as the Decapolis – the Ten Cities – and told what Jesus had done for him. And the people, Mark says, were amazed (5:20). You never know who may be amazed. You never know who may be touched. You never know who may be drawn to the Savior by your witness, or encouraged to persevere when they are feeling down and are about to give up.

Our Vacation Bible School children were taught this past week to “always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have” in Jesus (1 Peter 3:15). Always be ready and willing to share with others what the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you (Mark 5:19).

Lord, let it be so. Let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.