

### ***Common Ground***

In the powerful name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: A couple of weeks ago many Americans observed the 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Normandy invasion. It was by far the largest and most complicated amphibious assault against an enemy occupied shore ever conducted. Most of the thousands of brave young men who stormed those beaches are gone now, but it's right that we remember their accomplishment, for in the face of terrible odds and extreme danger they achieved a great victory and helped liberate Western Europe from an evil and oppressive regime.

That was my clumsy attempt to find some common ground between modern history and today's Gospel in which Jesus conducts a one man amphibious assault on an enemy occupied shore. And the soil on which Jesus steps when he gets out of the boat truly was *common* ground – *common* as opposed to holy. You see, most of Jesus' ministry took place within the boundaries of the Promised Land: the land set aside by the Lord for the people he called his own – and in that sense made holy; just as his people were holy by virtue of his having chosen them and given them his Word. But the country of the Gerasenes on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee lay outside the Promised Land. It wasn't holy. So it was in that sense *common* ground.

And it was inhabited by people who were likewise not holy. They were idol worshipping pagans who engaged in all kinds of vile practices like drunken orgies, ritual prostitution, child sacrifice, and things that fall into the category of what we call the satanic arts such as fortune telling, sorcery, and necromancy (that is, attempting to communicate with the spirits of the dead). Theirs was a morally debased culture. Absent the Word of God to guide them, sin ran its course through their society to its inevitable and ugly end. Oh, they might have imagined themselves to be free to live exactly as they desired; but in truth they were slaves to their own dark passions. They weren't free at all. They were very much in bondage to Satan's evil dominion. Jesus hits the beach with the intent of setting them free.

And immediately he is met by a man who is outwardly more obviously under Satan's cruel control. The poor guy is possessed by a large number of demons. They have tortured his thoughts and driven him to madness. They have ripped from him any sense of shame so that he wears no clothes. They've destroyed all his relationships and driven him from his home. He's become the enemy of all. He's even dangerous to himself. St. Mark's account of this same story tells us that he would cut himself with shards of broken pottery, and how he would sit howling among the tombs where he lived. For his safety and for theirs, his countrymen have tried to restrain him, but to no avail. He easily breaks his bonds and escapes his captors, and then flees from civilization to his home among the dead. In truth, they are the only neighbors he's fit for. He is the picture of absolute wretchedness in which sin leaves its victims: alone, unwashed, unkempt, in unrelenting pain, tormented in his body, his mind, and his soul.

He has watched the approaching boat in growing anxiety. The evil spirits within him know who's on board, and they are terrified; as well they should be. Likely the man himself senses their fear, and as used as he is to their company, he shares it. But rather than run away from this threat, he is strangely drawn toward the figure now stepping out of the boat onto this common ground. The man rushes down the beach toward Jesus and throws himself at his feet. Groveling before him in the sand, he asks a question which is actually kind of hard to translate.

We heard it rendered “What have you to do with me?” Actually, it’s an idiomatic phrase in Greek which would be more accurately cast “What to me and to you?” The sense of it is, “What have we got in common?” Or (to better fit my theme) “What is our common ground?”

A big question for us is: Who wants to know? Who is it that’s asking the question? Is it the appointed spokesman of the demons who possess him? Or is it the man himself? Or is it possible that *both* the demons and the man are asking the question of Jesus: “What’s our common ground?”

If it’s the demons who are asking, then the answer is: there is no common ground. Jesus and demons simply don’t go together. He is here to expel them from this earth and ultimately to destroy them eternally in hell. The time for that destruction has not yet arrived. It awaits the Last Day. And the demons are aware of this, which is why they beg not to be sent prematurely to their final doom in the Abyss of unquenchable fire. However, their ultimate fate is foreshadowed in what happens to the herd of pigs that Jesus grants them permission to enter. As soon as they take up residence in their fitting new hosts – unclean animals for unclean spirits – the hapless porkers are driven insane. In terrified frenzy they rush down the steep hillside on which they had been feeding, and they hurl themselves over a cliff into the lake where they all drown. Another Evangelist informs us that there were some 2000 pigs in the herd – which makes for a whole lot of ruined pork chops. The swineherds see all this and run away in fear. With them they carry the disastrous Ag report. And they spread the word of what happened.

But now let’s ask: what if it’s the man who is asking? Then the answer is a bit more complicated. At first brush, it would seem again that there is no common ground between Jesus, the holy Son of God, and this demonized man. After all, he’s a total unbeliever in the one true God. And he’s lived an especially sinful life. I mean, he was surely involved in all that other pagan stuff I mentioned earlier; but who knows to what depths of depravity he sank in order to open himself up and throw out the welcome mat to an entire legion of demons? It must have been something (or a lot of somethings) particularly atrocious. Jesus, the judge of all the living, would be perfectly justified in sending this man straight to destruction in hell along with the demons that had possessed him. No, from the man’s side there is no common ground between him and Jesus.

From Jesus’ side, however, it’s a different story. He’s all about finding common ground with the members of our fallen race. And where there isn’t any, he creates it. He did it first in his incarnation. He created common ground with us by taking on our flesh made up of the dust of the ground and becoming one of us. He made common ground with us by growing up as common Jewish peasant, and then working as a common carpenter. He started his ministry by standing in line with common sinners waiting to be baptized by John with common water, thus identifying himself with sinners – and making common ground with us in that way. Ultimately he would make common ground with us by going to the cross. Then he who was alone holy and righteous died a horrific death as a common criminal. And by so doing, he made holy and righteous we who are common, sinful, and unclean.

All of that which was to come later is foreshadowed in his dealing with the demoniac of the Gerasenes. Returning to the scene on the beach, now we find the man freed of Satan’s cruel grip. His senses have been restored. His soul has found peace in Jesus. Now his shame is covered by clothing – presumably provided by Jesus. He sits among the disciples at Jesus’ feet listening to the Master teach. He’s no longer alone and at odds with others; now he’s part of a community. He’s one with his brothers in Christ. He’s become a holy child of God.

By coming to the shore of this common ground and stepping on it, Jesus has begun the process of making this place holy. He does it first by making one notorious sinner holy. The rest of his countrymen, however, are fearful and reluctant. They can see that Jesus possesses great power to save. But they also know that he's bad for the pork production business. They are comfortable in their unclean ways and don't want to change. So they beg Jesus to leave them, and he complies.

Quite naturally, the man who was rescued from Satan wants to stay with Jesus. Like the disciples, he wants to be with him who has the words of eternal life – even if those words offend others. But Jesus tells him no, I have another job for you. Return to your home and declare what great things God has done for you. That is to say, Jesus makes him an evangelist. He's going to continue his assault on this common ground through the preaching of this man who was saved. It foreshadows what's going to happen in the future when Jesus sends out all of his disciples into unholy places in the common lands of the Gentiles. By their preaching many others who are common and unclean will be made holy through faith in Jesus and his saving work. And this is a nice touch: the man is told to return to his home and say what *God* has done for him. But he does more than that. In his zeal to share the good news, he goes throughout his *whole city* telling everyone what *Jesus* did for him. He understands and confesses that *Jesus is God*.

And so do we here in our little corner of southwest Iowa where the amphibious invasion Jesus began on that beach so long ago continues today. All around us is common ground. But here in this sanctuary we have a holy place. It's holy because this is where Jesus comes to us each week in his Word and Sacraments. He comes to free us from Satan's oppression. He does it by his powerful Word of Law that destroys the evil nature within us and brings us to repentance. He does it by forgiving our sins and covering our sin and shame with his precious blood. Here he grants us peace of mind. His Word shapes our understanding. It restores us to a right mind—the very mind of Christ. Here Jesus makes us part of a holy community – a holy community that cares for each of its members. And our common ground is our confession of faith in Jesus and what he did to save us.

And from here each week we go forth into common places where we meet common people. Many, perhaps most of them, are like the people of the Gerasenes: comfortable in their lives of sin and fearful of this fellow named Jesus who has the power to save. They are under the cruel oppression of Satan. And for the most part, they don't know it. It's not our job to change them. It's not our job to set them free. Our task in this ongoing battle is to use whatever common ground we have with them to bring them Jesus by telling them what great things he has done for us. And Jesus through our witness will make the common holy. May he grant our mission success. And to him be our thanks and praise forever. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***