

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I want to begin by asking a rhetorical question for us to think about...what identifies us as Christians? What identifies us as Christians?

Some may say the way we treat others. Some may claim their attendance in church identifies them as Christian. And to that I would probably very tactlessly say, I can sleep in my driveway too but that doesn't make me a car. Some may point to the Bible and say that the Bible identifies me as Christian. Some may continue down that line of thought and go a bit deeper and say the love of God made known in Jesus Christ makes me Christian or identifies me as Christian. Some may say our Baptism, others may say our faith makes us Christian. We could even refer to our appointed Epistle Reading for today where we hear St Paul say this:

²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God *through faith*. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There 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. (Gal 3:26-28)

All these things would be very good answers with the possible exception of the attendance in church...but all would identify us as Christians. But what is it about the faith that St. Paul suggests identifies us as Christians?

As much as this looks to be what identifies us, for the sake of argument, if we look a bit deeper, we find that our faith is not ours, it is given to us because by our own understanding or strength we cannot come to faith, it is a gift. So, can something that is not ours identify us? Now I know I am asking all this rhetorically and assuming the answers rhetorically as well, but I think in general I have covered most of our answers in one way or another...and I'm fairly certain that you all are thinking of much better answers, but probably not the answer I'm really searching for. According to our Gospel lesson today, we can say our recognition of Jesus would identify us as Christian. To that I would say, yes that is true too, but why then is that recognition of Jesus needed?

What I am searching for and what I truly believe identifies us as Christians is *our* need for Christ, but we then associate that need to our sin...and as with our nature, we certainly don't want to associate our sin with who we are as Christians. Who among us really wants to reveal the worst about ourselves when it comes to our faith or when it comes to religion...we seem to always want to put the best of ourselves in the forefront, especially when talking about our faith and how we live out our faith. But this "good Christian" masquerade is the very root of our sin...the denial of our true self and in that is our need for God's grace given through Jesus Christ... this is our Christian identity.

We seem to have a knack for quickly recognizing the sins of others while overlooking our own in order to show off our faith or to show we are Christians. We in turn disassociate ourselves from those we judge with our assumptions about sin, either metaphorically or even literally. And we do this before we recognize our own need through our own faults or sins...because there is no way we would even dare associate sin with our own Christian identity. Think not...have you ever heard this, thought this, or even said this..."and they call themselves A good Christian...we say that as

if we know what that means or we say it from the aspect that we are “A” good Christian...“well, thank God I’m not like that!”

Within our “good Christian” masquerade we attempt to speculate about things over which we have no control...such as God’s perception, God’s judgment and God’s grace. And in that we attempt to mount up our own defense with loopholes for ourselves within God’s perception and judgment and in that we restrict God’s grace. Other than Jesus Christ himself, I often wondered what “A good Christian” is or what would a good Christian look like? When looking at our identity as Christians, we tend to discount our need and our sin and attempt to idealize ourselves while we ignore the true nature of our humanness that is the ethos of our need and our sin. Within an honest assessment of our humanness and brokenness we find our *need* for God’s grace and forgiveness that is ours through our faith in Jesus Christ. This very need for Christ and the forgiveness and grace given us through him is what I believe makes us Christian. St. John reminds us of this very thing with these very familiar words in his first epistle:

⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:8-10)

This all plays out before us in our Gospel lesson today. In our Gospel we have people of a surrounding country masquerading as good people who have stripped and shackled a man who is without an identity, who is in need of grace...a man who is cast out in order to keep him out of the way of who these people think they are. And in this mess of fearful people, grace comes in the form of Jesus Christ.

I have always been moved by this story in our Gospel today. I am moved because it is very comfortable to me...comfortable because Jesus ventures into places that Jewish boys dare not go...or dare I say places where “good Christians” dare not go. What moves me in this Gospel is that Jesus without hesitation is in this dreadful place where this man is living. But more importantly, Christ is where there is need, he is where there is ugly and rejected brokenness, he is not in a church or temple, but in a forbidden and forgotten place where one is only caught dead in. But the part that gets me emotionally is, the assumed *sin* that this Gerasene demoniac has committed. What sin has this man committed?

His sin is not stated nor do we know...I believe more often than not, it is assumed because of his name...Legion which is associated with the many demons that possess him. But what do we really know about this man? I feel that there have always been more assumptions about this man and how this story is parsed out. We really do not know a thing about him other than he wore no clothes, he did not live in a house, and that he lived among the tombs...we do not even know his proper name. We know that he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by demons into the wilds. We know too that Jesus ventures into Gentile territory and encounters this man who is possessed by many demons and is rejected and cast out by others...but is he rejected because of his sin? Jesus doesn’t reject him...but the people do.

If we Look at the Gerasene Demoniac as he is referred to in commentaries, in the context of today's culture, perhaps this story and this man ought to be interpreted so that it speaks a word of assurance and hope to those for whom every day is a battle with depression, fear, loss of memory, anxiety, or any compulsive behavior.¹ Through this, a man who calls himself "Legion" which conveys a number and not a name, has lost his identity...but NOT his need for Christ. We are told that he shouted at Jesus at the top of his voice which actually reveals the man himself because demons do not shout out when faced by Jesus...the man is shouting at Jesus because he knows that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God and in his outcry to Jesus we see his need...and in that need, we find God's healing grace.

Every society seems to have people that cannot be controlled and we do what we can to keep them out of view and out of the way of who we think we are. Likewise, the Gerasene people are too busy keeping up their pious identity at the cost of this poor man's identity so they have bound and shackled him and then after that didn't work, the cast him out to the place where he could not be seen or associated with...allowing them to assume who they thought they were in the eyes of God...all leading to broken relationships and a self-inflicted alienation from God. But Jesus steps right into this dreaded place and by clothing this naked and tormented man he gives him his identity and he becomes a voice for God as he is sent back to his home town and to the very people who cast him out, to declare how much God has done for him. And we hear then that he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Looking at this man, we may have felt or even feel he is dangerous, mentally ill, isolated, oppressed, sick, wounded, frightened, and certainly misunderstood, none of these things identified him though in the eyes of the one who comes to him and restores him...Jesus Christ the same one who restores us all. Just as we assume our identity or who we think we are in the eyes of God, we do so by deceiving ourselves and stepping on others' sins to elevate ourselves when assuming God's perception, God's judgment and God's grace. Our identity as Christians is not based on our assumptions, it is based on our need of God's grace given to us through our faith in Jesus Christ. Our sin is our brokenness in which we find our need of God's grace in Jesus Christ and this is what identifies us as Christians and not our assumed righteousness.

We may not be possessed by a legion of demons...we are not naked, (thank God), and we may not be living among the tombs, nonetheless, we are all in need. And in our need, we too cry out to Jesus and from Jesus we see God's judgment and grace given, but given at a very dear price, that comes to us at the cost of the life of God's only Son Jesus Christ.

The good news for us today in this Gospel is this, God in Jesus Christ comes to us in the worst of places and in our most broken nature, reaches into our very souls, sees who we truly are, sees our need, and makes us whole. For God does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty; neither does He hide his face from them; but when we cry to God, God hears us. In the healing and restoration of this tormented soul, I would like to think that the Gerasene people are also restored by the man who went to them proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. Within our Gospel lesson today we truly see the depth of God's grace and mercy given to each and every one of us who are all Children of God in need of grace...who are all identified as Christian.

¹ Keck, Leander, senior editor. *NIB, The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. Volume IX, The Gospel of Luke, The Gospel of John*, Nashville: Abington Press, 1995. Luke 8:26-39 Commentary, Reflections, page 188.

Through Jesus Christ, the Son of the most High God, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer left or right, conservative or liberal, Democrat or Republican, there is no longer rich or poor, there is no longer male and female; for through our need, all are identified as Christian in Christ Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.