

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • August 15, 2021



The Scripture
Mark 5:15-20

They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

The Message
“11 Indispensable Relationships: You Need a Place”
Mark Briley

My uncle Steve was my mother’s oldest brother. It has been more than two decades since he passed away of a sudden heart attack. He was a fun uncle, or a *funcler* as it were. He always had a funny song or story to share and a contagious laugh to match. He collected old Cadillacs and golf carts, which meant great fun as a kid – going to the family farm and ramping ditches in his souped-up golf carts – never got to try that with the Cadillacs.

Uncle Steve had cerebral palsy, which affected his legs most significantly. Walking was struggle enough... running not an option. But he would drop the top on his convertibles and fly like the wind on those country gravel roads. Steve lived on the family farm with my grandparents, which was always a wonderful place to visit. We lived in the big city of Macon, Missouri... a bustling metropolis pushing 6,000 people when everyone was home and had friends in from out of town.

Going to the farm in Southwest Iowa was always a treat. The air was better, the views picturesque, the weeping-willow tree perfect for swinging out over those same ditches we jumped golf carts. We fed the pigs the husks and cobs of corn after we devoured the best sweet corn anyone could grow. My siblings, and cousins, and I learned valuable life lessons about the composition of cow manure patties, leeches of little farm lagoons, and that barn windows are not stronger than normal windows and do in fact break when introduced to a baseball.

I remember the unveiling of "*Steve Birt's Dirt*" ... a farmland adjacent to my grandparent's farm that Uncle Steve purchased as his own place. My oldest cousin owns farmland adjacent to that property, and the sacred ground of the family remains there. All four of my grandparents are buried in the cemetery once a part of my mom's family farm. Uncle Steve is buried there, too. My parents will be buried there some day. It is hallowed ground that floods my heart and soul with tremendous memories every time I step foot on that soil, which is not nearly enough these days. To me it is a place like no other.

I have one thing in my possession that belonged to my Uncle Steve. It is this decade's old sign that I have with me today. You probably can't read it from where you are sitting but it says, "*Cheers!*" It's inspired by the sign used for the local Boston bar bearing the same name, "*Cheers!*" Cheers was the site of the famous television sitcom that ran for 11 seasons during the 1980s and early '90s. It was a show about people who became connected through their experiences hanging out at this bar and is remembered most for its theme song and tag line that share, "*Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.*"



There is something very true about what this has to say about “*Place*.” Place is our 11th *witness* that we’re covering in our summer sermon series entitled “11” about the 11 indispensable relationships you need to help you live your best life.¹ We’ll conclude the series next week with a “*bonus witness*” that may be the most important of them all. But today we talk about “*place*,” a *witness* you might not have anticipated as the first ten *witnesses* were people.

Place is important. You probably have a place that comes to mind like the farm comes to mind for me. Every person needs a place. As free and untethered as our spirits can be, they also love to attach to physical matter, too. We inhabit a space, and it becomes a part of who we are. It’s why you have a favorite chair; and even when it’s falling apart, you still sink into it with a deep exhale, for in it you are truly known and held. It’s why you may gravitate to the same seat in this space over time; even those chairs are held in sacred place.

Poet Wendell Berry says you must use your body to become one with a place. He says,

“If you want to see where you are, you will have to get out of your spaceship, out of your car, off your horse, and walk over the ground.”

There is a sacredness of ground. Moses stands in front of a burning bush, and the voice of God says, “*Take off your sandals for you are standing on holy ground.*” For us that voice might say, “*Turn off your social media feeds, set down your smart phone, take off your Cole Hahns, or stilettos, and be aware of where you are*” ... you are amidst the creation of God. You are in a holy place.

Jesus would retreat to the wilderness to pray. He would distance himself from the busyness and buzz of life and retreat to holy ground... a place where he could connect with God. Many would argue that we live in an *out-of-place* culture with people living *out-of-place* lives. We are spiritual nomads, drifting from place to place, hopelessly searching for spiritual roots without earth to plant in.

Do you have a place? Of course, we are drawn to most places because of what happens there... memories held... community formed. It’s why that beloved sitcom *Cheers* named earlier connected with viewers. The place fostered relationships. Watching the show, you quickly forgot *where* they were, because you were engaged in *who* they were. America fell in love with Norm, the big teddy bear, Cliff the postman, Woody, and Carla and Sam and Frasier and the way their lives weaved together

¹ 11: Indispensable relationships you can’t be without. Leonard Sweet. David C. Cook publishing. Colorado Springs. 2008. This series is grounded in and inspired by Sweet’s work in this book. Any quotes or references to Len Sweet are linked to this work.

because of this place. *Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name...* your story, your life, your hopes and dreams, your struggles, and disappointments... a place where life is shared, and you are accepted for who you are.

It sounds like the making of a good church. A group of people, gathered together in a common search for meaning to life, purpose for living and support for journey. When rallied around a cause, such a place can become all the more powerful. When Jesus shared how the road to this understanding is difficult, the teaching against the grain of a self-absorbed culture, listeners fell away. As they did, Jesus looked around him to see that only his closest disciples remained. He asked them, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" They offer the greatest reply I can imagine: "*Where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*"

I have hung onto those words so many times. When life betrays us or hurts us or we fail and fall and find ourselves in a self-absorbed mess... it becomes easy to give up and say, this life of faith is too hard... it isn't worth it. I'm out. But then I hear those words again... "*Where else can I go?*" Jesus has something to speak into my life that I've never found elsewhere.

And the church... with its foibles, and at times the pettiness of we who fill them... and the bickering that can occur, the lack of vision, the hypocrisy, the hope lost, the hurt known... we can be like any other family, right? And I get why some have said, "*Look. I can worship God at the lake or on the golf course or wherever.*"

But...the Church is the Body of Christ... there are aches and pains and a bum knee, but the hope *does* live within. Can we rise above the worst of who we've been to discover the best of who we can be? I think we *must*... I think we *can*. I think we *are*.

Part of it comes in my own commitment to "*be the church*" in ways I'm counting on others to be the church, too. I invest in this place, in these people, in the trenches of vision and purpose; ministry and fellowship, for when life turns sour... when that diagnosis comes... when the job disappears... when the relationship doesn't pan out... where do you turn? To a place where everybody knows your name. A place where you have invested yourself in the lives of others and they in you. On at least three separate occasions this week, I was in meetings or receiving phone calls or with someone who said, "*I don't know how people survive this without the church.*" Through tears several said... just this week alone... "*I've found my place here.*" It is a place of support and healing... and a place where we can share a part in something beyond ourselves... something transcendent, something that only God can empower a people to do.

What is that calling for us, Broadway? We've been immersed in that work for more than 60 years now. And we're on the brink of opening ourselves again to the Vision of

a new day. If you've been here a long while, you know what this place has meant to you as your spiritual home. If you're new among us... even just a couple of years myself... we're catching the Broadway Spirit and believing what it can mean for our community yet. Same spirit... new manifestation... such is the way of decades and life and culture as it finds its way forward.

There's a fascinating story in Mark's gospel of Jesus healing a man named, Legion. He's called Legion because the word means "*Many*" – like an army of thousands if you will. He's got no real place. He's had his struggles, of course. and we could spend a whole series wrestling through some of his challenges and how a community struggles to accept and include him. But for today's focus – just know Legion has no place at the moment. No spiritual home. No small group. No service team he's serving with. Maybe he's burned out. Maybe he was apathetic – just didn't care anymore about what seemed to be a lot of hypocritical people faking their way through life. Maybe he was pushed out because he was different. There are many reasons we find ourselves without a place. And so, he's banished to the cemetery – which again for our purposes may be one way to say, "*There's nothing life-giving in his existence right now.*"

Jesus comes ashore and there's an encounter. Legion is jaded... probably for good reason. And he says to Jesus, "*Don't mess with me, man. Let me be. I'm done with everyone else, and they're done with me so don't you try to get in the mix now. Don't need it!*"

Have you felt this before? I've met a lot of people who have felt this way about Church. It's not that they don't long for Church – for that place Jesus crafted that could hold space for our spirits – where we could authentically share our lives, not laced with judgment and forced, stuffy doctrine – but real relationship where we find some common ways to serve, where we grow to understand faith as one that grows best in the dialogue and prayerful study – where we laugh and cry and trust we are held. But something happens... and we drift away from that as a Church, or we drift as individuals, and it just doesn't seem legitimately authentic anymore. Or the Church becomes a hurtful, desperate place, and souls like Legion leave saying, "*Ain't nobody got time for that.*"

But what does Jesus do? He turns directly to the demons in this man's spirit. Whew... wouldn't that be something? Whatever demons have you plagued right now -- demons may not be like little, devilish figures sitting on your shoulder or tormenting your spirit with tiny pitchforks – but they may be demons, nonetheless. They are your barriers to wholeness; demons of shame, or apathy, or hurt, or habits that separate.

The Spirit of God is always one that heals and brings together – anything that draws us apart, separates us, turns our spirits against community – are like these demons that

cast us out... that lead us to say, *"Don't need it. I'm done."* Jesus goes directly to the source of the separation... the hurt... the heartache and says, *"Let's heal that."* Why heal? Because Legion needs it... and so does his community. They need each other... just like we need each other.

When you're not here, you may feel like it's only you that's missing out, but I'll tell you... when you're not here, it's the whole of us that misses out. It's the nature of growth – when we're in the room where it happens – we sharpen each other, and the strength of the way forward grows exponentially. So, Jesus says, *"Let's get rid of the barriers."* And in dramatic fashion – Jesus casts those demons, those barriers, into the pigs hanging out nearby and as only in a tale of biblical proportions – the herd runs off the edge of the cliff and into the sea. He could have just said, *"Demons be gone,"* but this sure adds a little flair, right? And I've been in enough rural communities, like my grandparents farming town, to know this story doesn't win over many pig farmers.

But Jesus sees Legion – hurting, lonely, without place – and he didn't create him for such an existence. He created him to thrive alongside others who, in the words of Coldplay's latest song, *Higher Power*, are so happy to be alive at the same time as each other. I love that. I'm not sure why we're all here at this time... in this season... but I'm sure glad to be alive at the same time as you. We are the right mix at the right time for the right purpose God has brought us together for... and that just leaves me in a state of awe time and time again.

Legion feels the weight removed from his heavy spirit... and he's drawn to Jesus and says, *"Dude... I'm going where you're going,"* as Jesus was loading back in the boat. But Jesus says, *"Nah... not right now, Legion. You've got a place... go home to your friends, your community, and tell them what you know now. Tell them you're letting the barriers between you go. Help them release their demons, their barriers, too. You've got a place. Go there."* And, as the text ends, *"He was the talk of the town."* Why? People are hungry for transformation. And they long to be part of a place where transformation is the way forward. Is this the *witness* of our sacred place?

A place becomes a place of transformation by the way in which it carries each other. And like any family, we don't always get this right. Sometimes it's slow coming. Sometimes we cause hurt when our intention was to heal. But there's a sense of such a place that carries each other to, in and through transformation. There's a knowing feel. There's a palpable, almost tangible spirit. Sometimes there's even a sound to it.

Prescott, Iowa, the hometown of both of my parents, was home to my *Funcle* Steve, and a number of my extended family, for their entire lives. There will be more people in worship today at Broadway than the number reads on the population sign at the edge of town. While there were places *within* the place of Prescott – its people and character

were *place* in and of itself. They didn't always get it right as a community, but they were certainly a place that carried each other. I mentioned that Steve had cerebral palsy – countless surgeries on his legs in childhood, many braces and crutches and struggles to maneuver a world that long predated accessibility laws and accessible places. The old schoolhouse had no elevator and three stories of steps upon steps... which Steve couldn't navigate on his own. My mom and dad were a few classes behind Steve in school. They'd say, "*You always knew when Steve was coming down the stairs between classes.*" He had many a class on the third floor, and the cafeteria was in the basement. Up and down all day long. The sound was full – shouting classmates and teenage laughter and many a feet pounding the steps – as Steve's buddies picked him up on the third floor and barreled down at least six flights of stairs, carrying him on their collective shoulders. "*Many times,*" my parents would say, "*They'd wipe out at some point down the stairs, but they'd laugh and get up and go again.*" – sort of the same way he later drove his Cadillacs on those gravel roads.

It wasn't a burden. It wasn't a barrier. It was friends carrying friends. I didn't exist in those days, of course, but I've traversed those old school stairs since and have imagined that scene, and I love those friends for it. I love that place where it happened... because transformation happens in a place where people carry each other.

Thanks for being such a place, Broadway. Sometimes you want to go... where everybody knows your soul. May we always be a place that carries each other. When we do... if we will... transformation is inevitable. May it be so...

Amen.

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