

Remembering Our Story

Mark 5:1-20

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/ 14th July 2019

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat. It's the memorable title of a 1985 bestseller, written by the eminent neurologist Oliver Sacks (1933-2015). *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat: And Other Clinical Tales* describes the exceptional, we might even say "odd," case histories of some of his patients.

In a chapter titled "A Matter of Identity," Dr. Sacks tells the story of a patient with a memory disorder that rendered him unable to recognize not only others but himself—unable, that is, to retain the autobiographical facts which a person constellates into a selfhood. To compensate for this condition, the man unconsciously invented countless fantasies and false narratives about who he was and what he had done in his life, crowding the void of his identity with imagined selves and experiences he believed were real, believed were his own, far surpassing what any one person could compress into a single lifetime.¹

What we need to remember when it comes to pathological maladies of the mind is that they are complex clinical *extremes* of core human tendencies. Bipolar disorder, for example, oscillating between extreme highs and lows, is a complex extreme of being moody. And who among us isn't moody? The same could be said for some forms of depression. There are times when we are melancholy and sad, often for very good reasons; debilitating depression could, therefore, be viewed as a complex clinical extreme of a condition or experience that is quite "normal." Oliver Sacks had a special gift for magnifying these human tendencies in extreme clinical cases and providing a lens to zero in on how the ordinary mind works. He wrote about the extreme conditions of his patients in order to offer insights into the universals of human nature, the tendencies, the drives, the hopes of our shared humanity.

Reflecting upon this man who could not recognize himself, Sacks writes, "Such a patient must literally make himself (and his world) up every moment." This is a complex extreme condition which, to a large degree, is true for each of us, if you think about it, as we daily work to "hold" our lives together. Most of this work goes on unconsciously, but we also work consciously through the stories of our lives, the stories we tell ourselves, the stories we share when someone asks us: What's your story? Who are you?

Sacks wants us to see that narrative is the pillar of our identity. He writes, eloquently, "We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities." And, "If we wish to know about [someone], we ask, 'what is his/her story—his real, inmost story?'"—for each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is a singular narrative," Sacks writes, "which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us—through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narratives. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other;" Sacks reminds us, "historically, our narratives—we are each of us unique."

And then, driving the point home, Sacks says, “To be ourselves we must have ourselves—possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must ‘recollect’ ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. [One] needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain [one’s] identity, [one’s] self.”

If you don’t think this is essential to being human, try imagining your life without your story. Deep inside we know it’s true. Each of us is a biography, a story. And we love a good story, a good biography.

Consider *Hamilton*, the Broadway musical blockbuster about the life of Founder and first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804). Written and composed by Lin-Manuel Miranda, based on Ron Chernow’s Pulitzer-prize winning Hamilton biography. *Hamilton: An American Musical* is on tour throughout the U.S., and showing for about another week in Baltimore at the Hippodrome downtown. We went to see it on Wednesday evening—and it was extraordinary, electric. It’s become a cultural phenomenon. Can you believe it? A musical about Alexander Hamilton, incorporating hip hop, rhythm and blues, pop, soul, and traditional-style show tunes. Why has it struck a chord with so many, even with people who don’t ordinarily like musicals? The music, the set, the performances are, together, truly sensational. I suspect that it comes down to the story, the story of a remarkable individual. Hamilton was raised a Presbyterian, by the way, attended Elizabethtown Academy, a prestigious preparatory school run by First Presbyterian Church of Elizabeth, NJ. He was deeply religious, and even wrote several hymns as a boy. He wanted to go Princeton (the College of New Jersey), a Presbyterian institution, but eventually went to King’s College (now Columbia University), affiliated with the Church of England. Before his death he received Communion from the priest of Trinity (Episcopalian) Church in Manhattan—although you won’t learn any of this in *Hamilton*.² Driven, brilliant, gifted he was also a seriously flawed human being. He was an orphan who desperately wanted to be seen and loved and remembered, who wanted his life to mean something special, who wanted something more for his family, his children, for all Americans. Hamilton was a tragic soul. He was mortally wounded in a duel and died on 11th July 1804, 215 years ago last Thursday. At the close of the musical, the ensemble—George Washington, Aaron Burr, Eliza Hamilton, others—sing and ask a question that runs through the musical: “*Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?*”

“To be ourselves,” Sacks wrote, “we must have ourselves—possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must ‘recollect’ ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves.” So, what happens when you’ve lost the narrative thread? Or, worse, what if you’re possessed by someone else’s story? What if you get lost in someone else’s narrative, lose possession of your life? What does it feel like to not “possess” your own story?

Go out among the tombs, near the cliffs along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, in the land of the Gerasenes. Once upon a time there was a man who lived there, out among the tombs near the shore. He was possessed, but he didn’t possess himself. He lived among the tombs, surrounded by death and decay, isolated, alone, troubled, in tremendous anguish, in physical and psychic pain. And, man, was he strong, fierce, violent, angry, raging at himself, raging at the world for what the world had done to him—for what the Roman Empire had done to him! No one could restrain him, even with chains. He used to wrench the chains apart; he shattered the

shackles. No one could subdue him. He had the strength of an army, a Legion, 6,000 strong, ready for battle. Day and night among the tombs, he had no peace. He howled and screamed; he was crazed, in agony. Bruising himself, hurting himself with stones.

When Jesus arrived and faced him the demoniac assumed he was there to do to him what countless others, no doubt, had done before: torment him. You can't blame the demoniac for thinking that. But Jesus had other plans. "Come out of the man," he said. "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion; for we are many."

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. For me, it's one of the most concrete demonstrations of the gospel: this is what Jesus came to do and continues to do in the lives of his people. He brings liberation and release. Transformation. He confronts our broken, tormented, divided, and fractured lives, in order to make us whole.

But, you might say, this is a story about demon possession, what does this have to do with me? To talk of demons was an antiquated way to describe someone who was mentally disturbed or socially unfit to function in society. So we could say this man in Mark 5 was mentally ill. Perhaps. But, if this is a text about someone suffering from mental illness we can't avoid the fact that this text forces us to ask a deeper question, often overlooked these days when it comes to mental illness: *what made him so sick?* Not all forms of mental illness have biological origins. Sometimes it is caused by unspeakable trauma experienced by the psyche over a sustained period of time. Sometimes it is life itself that sends us over the top and then reality starts to crack. So how, then, do we relate to this story? I think it's easy to take this text and say, "Well, I'm not mentally disturbed like this guy, therefore it's not about me." It might be difficult to identify with this man. We might say: *He's not like me. I'm socially well-adjusted, secure, have family and friends, a roof over my head. I'm not living in a cemetery. Sure life is tough sometimes, but my life is nothing like his. I'm not sick like him. I'm in control of my life. There's little oppressing me.*

Perhaps. I'm not so sure. What if there's little of him in each of us?

Oliver Sacks might describe the demoniac as a complex clinical extreme. From this extreme case we learn something precious about what it means to be a human being, and what happens when one's humanity is denied, and we discover something about what the love of God looks like and feels like. Perhaps this is why I love this story so much because Jesus addresses this man's core humanity under his demon possession, Jesus speaks to the person buried underneath his possession, and it's his humanity that Jesus rescues and returns to life. Contemporary theologian James Alison said it well: "Jesus empowered the demoniac to become a human being..."³ He became a human being, again. Perhaps, then, we become more human through a story such as this. And we become more sensitive to the plight of other human beings whose humanity is being denied them—like those who are "possessed" and forced to live in cages in U.S. detention centers along the southern border. What about them, what about their humanity? What about their stories?

Unfortunately, we never learn the demoniac's real name, only his false name. Like so many, he took on the name of the forces oppressing, possessing him. He allowed them to "name" him. I wish Jesus had asked him a second time, after the healing, "So, now, what is your name?" Jesus would have heard a very different answer. And maybe it's good that we don't have his name, because then we would objectify the story and think it was only about him. But what if it's about us? What is your name—your *true* name? What if this is your story? What if we see in this story what Jesus continues to do?

If we let him, Jesus delivers us from our false-understandings, our false narratives, and invites us to return, like the demoniac, to our "right mind," clothed; he puts us back into our story. Sometimes one needs a lot of help, a lot of grace to reclaim, to re-possess the story of one's life. When this happens, we can remove the chains and all that binds us, discover a home, return to family and friends, to a community that knows us and loves us.

Did you notice that at first the man didn't want to return home, to his people? *Please take me with you. Don't leave me with them.* Can you blame him for what they did to him? And what did Jesus say? Jesus said, *No*. Jesus wouldn't let him stay with him. He said, instead: go and tell. "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has been gracious to you" (Mk. 5:19). By the grace of God, he's now part of a new narrative, with a very different story to share. The same is true for us.

¹ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat: And Other Clinical Tales* (Touchstone, 1998), 108ff. See Maria Popova's excellent summary "[The Building Blocks of Narrative: Oliver Sacks on Narrative as Pillar of Identity.](#)"

² On Hamilton's connection to Princeton University see:

<https://blogs.princeton.edu/mudd/2008/01/alexander-hamiltons-connection-to-princeton/>

³ James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Gay and Catholic* (Crossroad Publishing, 2001), 131-133. Alison's reading is based on the work of René Girard, "The Demons of Gerasa," in *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).