



June 23, 2013

Larry DeLong

Staying Behind – Luke 8:23-29

What would you do if you won the lottery? Not just some piddling million or two, but a really big score? There's a lot written about people who hit the big numbers, but the bad news is that something like seventy percent blow it all within five years. Ouch.

For some, the instant celebrity – or notoriety – that comes with that sudden wealth means that creditors come out of the woodwork, especially if you've been avoiding child support or outstanding warrants. Winning the lottery's not all it seems – there's more than one facet to the story.

Diamonds have many facets, though a gem's setting may hide some. But in the Kingdom of God, every facet still shines, even if it's obscured by the way it's set.

Take today's story. Most of the time, people focus on the miracle of the exorcism, or that there were multiple demons at work (the word "legion" is fascinating), or that Jesus seems to have some sort of compassion on the demons, letting them go into the pigs instead of "the

abyss” – much to the distress, not just of the pigs, but also the villagers, who lose their livelihood along with their porkers. There’s sound reasoning behind the locals’ insistence that Jesus find someplace else to do his work; the man who was possessed may have been scary, but at least he didn’t ruin their economy.

There’s plenty of, well, fodder for a faithful follower of Jesus to work with here. That’s the point: the work of the Kingdom, the proclamation of the Good News of God, still has to be done, even after the demons depart and the pigs head to that great sty in the sky.

The central character, the man who’d suffered so much for so long (yet isn’t even given a name in the Gospel story – usually called the Gadarene Demoniac), who finally can be like everyone else, only wants one thing: to go with Jesus, wherever he’s going. Who can blame him? A lot of us would like to, as well!

Many, many addicts – once the demon of addiction has been silenced – want, more than anything else, to be addiction counselors. When I was in seminary, it sometimes seemed that most of my classmates had found God in some miraculous way, and, their lives transformed, felt they had to respond by becoming preachers. But in reality, their call was to stay behind, to spread their story of salvation right where they already were. Not every recovering addict is meant to

be a counselor, most certainly not every Christian is called to be a pastor – and, by the grace of God and some harsh realities, most figure that out.

Because – well, because God calls different people in different ways to do different things in different places at different times. A classmate of mine was a professional musician, had played with several major symphony orchestras. Then, in a time of deep crisis, Christ transformed his life, and his whole family. He gave up music, and dove into ministry. Twenty years later, I saw him in a TV commercial, still showing that glow of faith he had when I knew him, but now back in the horn section of an orchestra, no longer a pastor. He *was* called by God, but to stay put.

Sometimes, though, things don't turn out so simply. I am drawn to this man in Luke: we have a glimpse of what life was like for him before he met Jesus, but what did life look like afterwards? He'd been a nuisance to his village as a demon-possessed denizen of the local graveyard; but the price of his cure was the town's wealth: that herd of pigs. Taken without their permission, I might add. Things like this make folks nervous, as it clearly did here. These good citizens didn't want to sound ungrateful; hey, Jesus, thanks for the help, but – would you please help someone a little farther away? Like our competing village down the lake. We can't afford much more healing like this!

What's more, they could not look at the man they'd known as a huge problem for years without skepticism, mistrust, or active anger. All this was, after all, *his fault*. Nuisance became money out of *their* pockets, food out of *their* mouths.

Despite all this baggage the man had to face, Jesus makes him stay behind, stay in his town, even though he pleads to go with Jesus. The reason Jesus gives is simple: "Return home and tell how much God has done for you."

The story's told of a man tarred, feathered, and ridden out of town on a rail. When one of his tormentors said, "Well, what do you think now?", he replied, "If it weren't for the honor of the thing, I'd as soon have walked." It wouldn't surprise me if this anonymous man in Luke didn't have similar ambivalent feelings about what happened to him, once he had to stay behind and live with not just his demon-free future, but his past. Survivors of mass tragedies often have similar mixed feelings – why did I live, and she didn't – and many a wise person would have preferred to remain fat, dumb, and happy instead of being being smart enough to realize the consequences of life.

Something like this is likely true for some of us. Sure, we're all here, and I hope that you're happy to be here in this place praising God. But some are wishing they were somewhere else: with a family member who's in crisis; with a spouse or friend who's moved away or died; in a

place that still calls you, but to which you cannot return. Still, you are here; and in that way, you, too, have been called to stay behind.

When the great prophet Elijah's time on earth was over, God had him carried bodily into heaven instead of dying and being buried in the earth. His faithful disciple, Elisha, knowing that God was literally calling Elijah home, refused to listen as Elijah repeatedly told him to stay behind: Elisha wanted most of all to stay with his mentor, but if that was not possible, to receive twice the prophetic gifts of Elijah, which he'd only get if he saw Elijah swept away. So he followed Elijah until a chariot of fire took Elijah away.

Elisha stayed behind, and got that double portion of Elijah's gifts – along with all their responsibilities and tribulations. He turned into was a pretty cranky guy, even for a prophet: once set two bears on some kids who made fun of him. Yet he is also renowned for restoring poisoned wells, raising the dead, healing and cursing.

So. In some way, we have all been left behind, either forced or chosen to stay right here, for now. And in that, God has planted a purpose, whether we know it or not; whether we want it or not; whether that purpose will grow up to cause someone problems or not – like the pigs who died to save our story's hero.

Jesus Christ has called each one of us to service – whether at his feet, in the world somewhere, or right where we are. The man in Luke

had to face the people he'd known all his life for the rest of his life – but we are also told that he did what he was told to do: proclaim what Jesus had done for him. Everyone around him knew the bad stuff: but he made sure they knew the good, too.

Without his witness, they'd have been left only with the strange story of some malicious magician. Instead, they heard the story of life, because he stayed behind.

And us? We're all in this together – along with the five elders and deacons we're about to install. They've been given a special call, unique to each, and our prayers for them ought to be that each hears and executes that call faithfully.

We, too, have been called, in some way, to stay behind, right here. That call has been put this way: “One does not become a Christian and then join the church; one joins the church in becoming Christian.” As we answer God's call, God's claim on us by living faithfully, to the best of our ability, we, too, join in the process of the church “becoming Christian.” Welcome to right here, everyone.