

Verse one in chapter eight ends the story of the Gadarene demoniacs. After Jesus demonstrated that God's rule of love has the power to eliminate evil influences, and after the demons demonstrated that by nature, evil eventually ends in nothingness or non-being, the people of that town became very nervous and ask Jesus to leave.

This may sound strange to us. Wouldn't people welcome someone who had such awesome power? But that's the problem. Awesome power makes people nervous. The townspeople had learned to live with the presence of the demoniacs because they were limited to the tombs. So long as they avoided wondering anywhere near this cemetery, they could rest assured that their lives were secure from the presence of these fearsome creatures. However, the power of Jesus was not something they could necessarily control. Who knows what this person is capable of? Recall, these folks are gentiles and have no reason to be looking for a messianic figure. Jesus was a wholly unknown person to them. People are more comfortable with what they know than with what they don't know, even if what they know is not particularly pleasant.

Moreover, that a human being had power over evil spirits indicated that Jesus came from or was connected to something unknown and mysterious. He didn't fit into their understanding of the world, or into their religion. Therefore, rather than having to deal with the challenge Jesus presented to them in their various ways, better to get rid of him entirely.

The human desire to live in denial of things that either challenge our point of view or represent a contradiction to our belief system is amazing. Denial leaves us comfortable and unchanged. But is also leaves us very ignorant. Living in the darkness is not only common. It's the rule. We will often choose denial over enlightenment because it keeps us comfortably ignorant of things we don't want to deal with. Jesus, who never forces himself on anyone and who is never anxious over the fact that some people reject the truth, simply gets into a boat and returns to what is now his hometown—Capernaum by the sea.

Predictably, the sick and walking wounded show up, some being carried by their loved-ones. The first is a paralytic. Matthew observes that Jesus saw their faith. As in the other healing stories, this is most important. Faith receives the love and forgiveness of God. Faith also receives his healing power. This is true for one simple reason. The power Jesus has comes from the Holy Spirit. Just as the Holy Spirit creates faith, and just as the Spirit is the power that frees our conscience when we are forgiven, just so, the Spirit is also the power of healing and restoration. The Holy Spirit is divine power, the same power that, in Paul's words, "Makes all things new." The Spirit's power is not limited to the power to transform our hearts. The Spirit can also heal our bodies. It is a divine power.

In the case of the paralytic, Jesus first tells him his sins are forgiven. What does this have to do with his paralysis? Again, we are dealing with the "doctrine of retribution." People believed illnesses were a punishment for sin. Therefore, the first thing Jesus does is heal

his conscience. He eliminates his guilt so that he no longer blames himself or God for the paralysis.

But Jesus has another agenda as well. Seeing the scribes in the crowd (people who interpreted the law), he wants to provoke them. And he knows that if he tells this man his sins are forgiven, he will be accused of “blaspheming.” Only God can forgive, and as far as the scribes are concerned, Jesus is only a man.

This allows him an opportunity to demonstrate that he is God in human form. So he asks them which is easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or “Get up and walk.” He doesn’t have to wait for an answer. He knows the answer. Anyone can conceivably say, “Your sins are forgiven.” Only God can make the man get up and walk home. Since this is precisely what happens at the command of Jesus, this confirms Jesus’ authority to forgive sins. Why? Because God is present in him.

While the crowd is duly awestruck, nevertheless they still don’t really get the message. They glorified God for giving such power to “human beings.” No. God gave his power to no one. They still don’t understand that “The Word became flesh.” (John 1)

Matthew 9:9 records the call of Matthew the tax collector. Like the other disciples, Jesus’ divine authority is somehow perceived on his part so he leaves his corrupt and sinful life behind to follow Jesus. This is what Jesus does to all who receive him through faith; he transforms their lives. For some of us, it takes awhile. As St. Augustine describes in The Confessions, it can be difficult to give up our independent will and the things to which it is attached. This, in part, led Augustine to the conclusion that all people seek joy and happiness in something. The question is: Can it deliver, or are you creating an idol for yourself? “Our hearts are restless, O God, until the rest in you.”

The call of Matthew is a good entre into the next scene. When Jesus sat at dinner, he was joined by all the riff-raff—tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees can’t figure that out. Why would a teacher of the law share a meal with law-breakers? From their point of view, this is a legitimate question. The common view was that such people should be avoided because they were violating the terms of the covenant made with Moses. To them, this looked like a contradiction—the world going upside down.

In order to help them understand, Jesus uses a medical metaphor. He calls himself a physician. That’s new—a teacher who is a physician? How does that work?

He is attempting to transform their point of view. Instead of looking at sinners as moral degenerates who care less about God’s law, he wants the Pharisees to see these sinners in the same way they see sick people. These are not people to reject. They are people who need treatment. The church or synagogue is not just a school for learning the law. It’s like a hospital where people can get treatment. This changes everything because now, “sin” is being recognized as a condition that requires treatment. Moreover, it can be cured. That’s why he is at table with them. He is their divine physician. The Pharisees think they are well and in no need of a physician. Therefore, Jesus sends them off so as to learn more

about who God is and what he does. They are in a state of ignorance and in need of enlightenment. "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners."

This truly does stand everything upside-down. This is the opposite of how people were taught to think. The idea of sin and the idea of the role of the Messiah were completely changed in one fell swoop. Sin is not just a matter of behavior. It's a matter of being, of the health of the sinner. Yes, sin is still something that breaks God's law. But Jesus is looking beyond the act and into the heart of the sinner. A sinner is not well. He needs treatment, a treatment that will change the heart and thereby will eliminate the sin. The standard belief regarding sin was that God required the sinner to make a sacrifice for the atonement of his sin. Not so, according to Jesus. Rather, what God wants is mercy. By giving the sinner mercy, which includes love and forgiveness, the sinner can change his life and become well, which means someone who does not demonstrate the symptom of sin.

The use of this medical metaphor enables Jesus to change the way in which people looked at these rejected and marginalized people. Rejecting them only made them worse. And as far as the sacrifice was concerned, even if they could afford one, it did no good. Therefore, God doesn't want it. The prophets had said this already many times before. Jesus did not come to condemn or to pronounce that such people were "dead." There are no death certificates in the Christian faith, only life certificates. He came to heal them, and he does this by showing mercy.

This challenges their whole understanding of the nature and being of God. Later on, this will lead to John's famous statement, "God is love." God's being is not primarily that of a judge, rendering punishments and rewards. Rather, God's being heals, restores, and makes whole. Sin and evil are definitely excluded. But they are excluded, not in a moralistic way, but in the same way in which a physician excludes diseased tissue.

One more important thing in this regard. Jesus doesn't treat the disease of sin by applying some sort of medication, as a doctor does. Rather, Jesus is the medication. As we saw in the gospel of John, the Holy Spirit brings the resurrected Lord into our hearts and thereby confers salvation. Salvation is another word for wholeness and well being. New birth in the Spirit brings the salvation Jesus accomplished into our hearts and minds, reunites us with God, and thereby gives us the gift of life everlasting.

In Matthew 9: 14-17, John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus why his disciples didn't fast often. In order to understand his answer, it is necessary to know that fasting was a sign of repentance. One of the ways in which to show that a person was penitent for their sins was to engage in acts of self-denial. One might also put on "sack cloth and ashes." John's baptism was precisely for this purpose, so one would expect acts of penitence from his disciples.

Jesus' answer points to the fact that his coming was for an entirely different purpose. Yes, he did call on people to repent, but this was so that they could hear and believe in the good

news of the Gospel. He is not a prophet calling them to repent. He is their Savior who is going to restore them to a right relationship with God.

In order to help them understand, he uses the metaphor of a wedding. In those days, before the wedding, everyone would wait in anticipation for the coming of the bridegroom. At this point, the wedding celebration would begin. He (Jesus) is the bridegroom, the One whose coming would mark the beginning of the great eschatological feast at the end of time, the celebration that God's kingdom had come.

He then uses an image to describe what is going on. His message is new. This is not the same old message that the people have to repent. The time for rejoicing has arrived because to repent is to turn to God. To rejoice means God has turned to them in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the old ways of doing things have to be abandoned. We need new wineskins, the wineskins of rejoicing.

In Matthew 9:18-25, we have a combined story of two healings. In the beginning of the text, a leader of the synagogue approaches Jesus in a way that demonstrates his faith in Jesus' power and grace. He kneels and acknowledges his power. Only this time, the challenge is greater. His daughter is not just sick. She is dead. Nevertheless, Jesus gets up and follows him according to his faith. Before Jesus gets to the dead girl, a woman who had suffered from uncontrolled bleeding for twelve years touches the hem of his cloak, saying to herself, "If only I touch his cloak, I will be made well." Once again, faith precedes healing. She is indeed healed and Jesus' punch line is "...your faith has made you well." Faith receives healing grace, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. God has the power to save us from anything. However, since we are not robots, and since being made well means healing the whole person, including the will, we must receive it by faith. Faith opens us up to God's healing grace because it is our conviction that God can and will do it if we so desire. It means turning our will towards God in Christ instead of something else. When we turn our will and heart for ultimate healing, happiness, and salvation to something else, we create an idol. We confuse the creation for the creator, and the result will be predictable, namely, disappointment.

When Jesus arrives at the synagogue leader's house, the mourning over his daughter's death has already commenced. Jesus asks the mourners to leave saying, "She is sleeping." Predictably, they laugh. It's the same laugh people have been offering in response to the promise of everlasting life ever since the Gospel message came into existence. (See Paul in Acts 17:16-39) The notion that life can come out of death contradicts everything we know of this world and about ourselves. The nature of life in this world is that it is clearly mortal. Our bodies were made out of the same thing stones are made of—the elements of the earth. Moreover, it is a law of nature that things return to a state of less complexity. So even if our experience didn't tell us that death is the last word on life, our science would. From a biblical point of view, God created everything out of nothing. This "stuff" that he created exists in time; it's changeable, mutable, and vulnerable to disintegrating for any number of reasons. There is nothing in the universe that will not at some point disintegrate—including stars.

So, to suggest that a dead person can live is even more fantastic than saying a dog can grow wings and fly, a stone can talk, or a worm write Hamlet. At is simply beyond rational belief.

There is only one way such a thing could be conceived of, namely, that the entire mutable universe was made out of nothing by a God about whom we can know nothing for the very reason that this God's being is beyond our ability to perceive or detect in any way. This God would have to come out of hiding as a creature so that we could see him. (We have already gotten stuck in a contradiction that an eternal being could become temporal.) He would then have to use the same creative power through which all things came into being (John 1) and reverse a process that can only be reversed through some means beyond our ability to understand. Since the Jews at that time did not believe in such a figure, a God-man, they—much like our wise, educated, and secular friends—laughed. On the surface it is indeed laughable. In a post-enlightenment world, a world that gave up on revelation as a source of knowledge and turned to reason and observation instead, this idea is laughable. We have no theoretical framework from which to account for this proposed possibility. Unless the enlightenment got it wrong, and unless we have built a whole culture and worldview on what is at best only partial knowledge (and who would want to entertain such a notion, with the exception of children), no one is going to believe that dead people rise to life, and not only life, but immortal life!

All this means that the only way people can deal with the message of Easter is to find a metaphor that makes sense according to the assumption that once dead, there is no going back. Death is permanent. So what do we do? We either turn Easter into a fertility celebration with rabbits and eggs receiving the honors. Or, we turn it into the celebration of something that is wholly natural, namely, the transformation from a cocoon to a butterfly. This we can deal with. Anything that dares go beyond the natural world is dismissed as either fantasy or as a metaphor. It's not real.

This is one of the reasons Jesus mentioned the possibility of being offended by him. "Blessed is he who is not offended by me." The "offense" comes from two places. First, the idea that a human being can be God is self-contradictory because they have incompatible attributes. Secondly, his message of resurrection flies in the face of everything we know and can demonstrate as being true. So, one of the most difficult problems for faith in a world "that has come of age," (Bonhoeffer), in a world that has matured out of its mythological past, is taking offense. The only possible way of growing out of this offence lies in the power of God. Only God could give us faith in the Christian Gospel. Once again, see Luther's explanation to the third article of the creed—an explanation written for children. Go figure.

In any case, all Jesus had to do was take the dead girl by the hand and she got up. This man is either God, or he never existed in the first place. Since the later is historically indefensible, the former is something we can either **ignore** (the most common response), **endeavor to disprove** the historicity of the story (We don't have enough information to do that.), **dismiss** it as the worldview of people who were too ignorant to know better (This is the secular ideologues' favorite.), or we can actually **ask God to give us the faith**

to believe. This is the Christian alternative, and the most recent theologian to speak and write about this in great detail was the Swiss theologian Karl Barth who based his famous 13 fat volumes' work called The Church Pragmatics on what he called "the impossible possibility," namely, faith.

Matthew continues with his recordings of a string of miracle stories in verses 27-31. Here we have two blind men who want to see again. In accordance with what has preceded this healing story, Jesus wants to first confirm their faith. So he simply asks them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They respond, "Yes, Lord." Use of the term "Lord" is significant because it designates their confession that he is divine. He heals them, "According to your faith..." Here again, it must be noted that faith plays a role in the effectiveness of God's power and grace. It's not that Jesus couldn't have done it without their faith. It's that he doesn't force his healing or saving power on anyone. He wants us to receive it willingly. This is important because it preserves our freedom. Human beings cannot be made whole without the preservation of our freedom because that's an essential aspect of what it means to be created in the image of God. It is sin that makes a slave out of us. Sin is, at bottom, attachment to an idol. In our desire to live independently of God, we necessarily turn to other things as the source of ultimate meaning and happiness. Since there are only two kinds of things to choose from, Created things and God, we really end up with no choice when we turn from God. It doesn't matter what we choose to turn into an idol. No matter what it is, it's not God. Therefore, it is subject to "moth, rust, and thieves." Moreover, this being the case, we are vulnerable to fear, despair, hopelessness, and death. Only God can give what our hearts are seeking, namely, life, love, hope peace, strength, and meaning. In other words, "salvation."

Everyone seeks salvation. While a non-believer would respond by telling you to stick it in your ear (or worse), nevertheless, they can't escape their own hidden desires. Neither can they escape the consequences of choosing an idol—a restless heart. Denial on their part doesn't make it go away. Moreover, neither will they escape their paralyzing fear of death. For no idol takes death away. On the other hand, the presence of Christ in faith gives assurance of life everlasting. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Paul, Galatians 2:20) Verses confirming Paul's awareness of salvation are all over his letters.

In any case, the two men have enough faith so that they can receive Jesus' power to heal them. As in the above stories, Jesus tells them to keep quiet about it, but to no avail. They blab and blab and blab all over the region.

Matthew wouldn't want to leave out a deaf person, so this is what comes next. Only here, it was a demon that caused the problem. Jesus demonstrates his power over evil spirits by casting this nuisance out of him, and he can hear again. Again, the people are amazed. But this time, a few Pharisees, probably jealous, come up with a lame theory to explain Jesus' power. His power was undeniable so they try to come up with an explanation whereby they can still condemn him. "By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." This is an explanation one can only blush over. Demons are on the same side! One will not cast out another. Like politicians who simply can't find the honesty to acknowledge that someone on an opposing side may have a good point, they descend into foolishness. In fact, whole

political parties sometimes do this! Sound familiar? It should. Human nature is amazing for how far it's willing to go to look stupid. Honest people can only shake their heads. Jesus doesn't even give them that.

The chapter ends much as this section started back in chapter 8:1. There are large crowds. There are countless illnesses and disabilities. Life back then was often short, brutish, and painful. No antibiotics. No painkillers. No social safety net or emergency rooms that had to take you. Poverty was rampant. The rich found ways to deprive even the poorest of what they had. Not even flush toilets were available.

When people heard of what Jesus was capable of, they flocked to him, and as he saw them, they all looked like "sheep without a shepherd." They were. Where were these people supposed to find any sense of hope?

We might think, "Good God, I'm glad I didn't live back then!" This is entirely understandable. However, keep this in mind: we have the means and the wealth to make life much more comfortable and easy to deal with. On the other hand, these very means of comfort can keep us from seeking the true means of grace for years and years and years. We live out our nice and comfortable middle class life only to discover that in the end, we are faced with the very same human condition, namely, death. So we received a few more years. We spent them distracting ourselves with the things money can buy. We may have even traveled around the world, and it was fun while it lasted. But we were still on a one-way track to eternity. And when we are used to having our lives filled with so much, the black hole at the end looks even blacker when we have to give it all up. Death seems even that much greater an enemy when a person goes from an abundance to nothing.

This was not the problem of these folks, not that of billions who still live in this world today. No wonder America seems like such a heaven on earth to so many people—even though it isn't. And no wonder we feel as if we need to protect ourselves from these masses of poor who are fleeing unspeakable violence and cruelty.

There was no America to aspire to in first century Palestine. However, word got out that there was a man of unbelievable kindness and compassion, a man who had the power to restore a person to the simple pleasures of life like being able to see, or hear, or walk. Some even suggested this might be the Messiah, God's anointed sent to save his people from—what? Disease, the Romans, tax collectors, the rich and powerful, bad luck? In any case, they flocked to him with every problem under the sun. So he told his disciples to pray for more workers, people who could bring the good news of the kingdom of God to them. And I would guess that a number of them became believers. This is important in the extreme. For it means that even though their lives were short, brutish, painful, insecure and with few comforts, nevertheless some of them caught a glimpse of an eternal vision, a vision of their God, come in human form in order to call them into a kingdom where there would be no pain and death anymore.

Thus endeth Chapter 9