

“Binding the Real Strong Man, Mental Health or Guns!”

25 June 2023

Scripture: Mark 3:27, Mark 5:1-3

Mark 3:27 But no one can “break and enter” into a strong man's house and take his belongings without first tying up the strong man. Only after he’s been “neutralized” can his house be looted.

Mark 5:1-3 Then they came ashore on the other side of the sea [of Galilee], in the region where the Gerasenes lived. Immediately when Jesus set foot on land he was accosted by a deranged man. This man lived among the tombs in the cemetery and they had often tried to restrain him with shackles and chains, but the chains he always wrenched apart and the shackles he always broke into pieces. Absolutely no one had the strength to subdue him and nothing could keep him under control. Day and night he was heard out among the tombs alone in the hills howling and bruising himself with stones.

He had seen Jesus in the distance and ran to meet him before bowing down before him shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want from me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? For God’s sake, stop torturing me!" (He said this since Jesus had commanded, "Come out of him, you diabolical force!")

Jesus then began questioning him, “What's your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, “ for there are a whole lot of us.”

And they kept begging Jesus over and over not to send them out of their territory.

Now it just so happened that on the neighboring hillside a great herd of pigs was feeding. And so those diabolical forces bargained with Jesus, asking that he instead, “Send us over to the pigs, so that we can enter them.” Jesus agreed, granting them permission to leave and those diabolical spirits left the man and entered the pigs.

Immediately the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed over a cliff and into the sea where they all drowned.

Sermon — Binding the Real Strong Man, Mental Health or Guns

Just a little over a year ago, on May 24, 2022, 18-year-old Salvador Ramos, after shooting and severely wounding his grandmother in their home, drove to the Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. When the former student arrived at the school, he began firing an AR-15 style rifle for approximately five minutes outside the school before entering unobstructed through an unlocked side door.

Once inside, he shut himself inside two adjoining classrooms, without locking the classroom door. Ramos remained in those two classrooms for more than an hour before he was finally fatally shot law enforcement. But before he was shot, he was able to fatally shoot 19 students, ages 9, 10 and 11, and two teachers, leaving 17 others injured. The shooting in Uvalde was the third-deadliest school shooting in the US, after the Virginia Tech shootings of 2007 and Sandy Hook in 2012, and the ninth-deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history.

In the immediate aftermath Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott responded with a call for more resources for mental health. Abbot, and his party, have singularly invoked mental health issues as the root cause of mass shootings in the state, including the recent mass shooting at an outlet mall in Allen, Texas, as well as the 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting, the 2019 Midland-Odessa shooting, the 2018 Santa Fe High School shooting and the 2017 shooting in a Baptist Church.

Blaming mental health as the main cause of mass shootings is not unique to Governor Abbott or the state of Texas, but a common claim by most gun rights advocates. It is mental health, rather than guns, that must be treated and controlled in order to reduce gun violence they argue.

Certainly, any increases in mental health spending and services should be welcomed by all of us in every state. Increased spending on mental health is of course especially needed in states like Texas where most mental health services are actually inaccessible to so many due mainly to a critical shortage of mental health professionals.

But there's little actual evidence that increased funding of mental health services can actually reduce gun violence. In a 2016 literature review by the American Psychiatric Association found that mass shooters with serious mental illness account for less than 1 percent of annual gun-related homicides. That study also found that only about 3 percent of violent crimes and an even smaller share of those involving a firearm, were committed by individuals with serious mental illness.

Blaming America's gun violence epidemic on mental health, not only is NOT supported by the facts, but obscures the much stronger link that exists between gun ownership and gun deaths. A 2013 Boston University study found that for each percentage point increase in gun ownership at the household level, a state's firearm homicide rate increased by .9 percent - nearly equal.

This is true in Texas, a state that has more guns than any other and where there is a higher-than-average number of gun deaths.

Focusing disproportionately on mental health as a major cause of gun death, actually leads to fewer folks seeking treatment. Why? Because linking the two issues reinforces the already existing stigma of mental health and this decrease in treatment merely adds to current the public health burden.

In the passage we read from Mark 5, Jesus was immediately accosted upon his disembarkation along the shores of Lake Galilee. This person was greatly disturbed, someone who by all accounts was suffering from a serious mental disorder.

Not only did he live in the local cemetery among the tombstones, but he wandered the streets, hollering all day, and literally howling at the moon at night. He was a danger to himself, due to his self-mutilation and was most likely a threat to hurt others.

He had superhuman strength (maybe due to drug use) and so far, all attempts to confine and treat him, had failed. Not only was he resistant to treatment, he also managed to avoid all attempts at involuntary commitment and confinement.

But curiously, it was not the man himself whom Jesus initially confronted, it was instead the diabolical spirits whom Jesus took issue with. And these diabolical spirits were both personal and evil systemic forces that were in powerful control of the social order of that day. And both needed to be brought under control, cast out, and sent away in order for both personal and societal healing to occur.

Earlier in 3:27, Mark's Jesus makes the overwhelmingly obvious statement that "no one can break and enter into a strong man's house and take his belongings without first tying up the strong man."

Then in Chapter 5 we encounter an incredibly crazy strong man who can break the chains and locks that were used to bind him. To help his readers decipher the exact identity of the strong man, Mark does provide us some very interesting clues.

First was the locale. The story takes place "in the country of the Gerasenes," a region where the Roman Empire had built the Decapolis, "or ten cities" in order to settle Roman citizens, mostly retired soldiers, who could then more effectively occupy and control this sometimes volatile region.

Second, the high percentage of gentiles then might also explain why such a large "herd" of pigs (2,000 exactly) might happen to be so conveniently grazing in a predominantly Jewish country. In reality, pigs are seldom if ever described as living in herds. However, the Greek word that Mark used also referred specifically to a group of Roman soldiers.

Third, the demon calls itself, "Legion," another if more obvious Roman military term for, you guessed it, 2,000 soldiers.

Finally, Jesus sent the demons away to inhabit the swine, who then subsequently hurtled themselves over the cliff to their own demise. One has to wonder if this was an allegorical attempt by Mark to express Jesus' contempt for, and his desire to clear the region (if not the entire world) of the oppressive and destructive means of Empire builders and military occupation.

At least for now, according to Mark, the “strong man” was Rome. However, militarism and Empires are constant threat to God’s people that each and every generation must eventually confront.

So, who then is the “strongman” that we must confront in our society and in our efforts to end gun violence in our nation?

Well, for starters, as I said earlier, it certainly is not mental health. And I would add that it is not primarily violent video games, absentee parents, divorce, the failure to post the ten commandments in schools, liberal “wokeism,” or even Drag Queen story hours.

The strongman that causes our excessive amounts of gun deaths in this country, simply put, is the availability of guns. Our currently feeble attempts thus far are just not enough and have proven incapable of keeping this strongman shackled.

What is needed are stronger federal and state gun control measures. We can actually begin with a couple measures that are actually widely popular with a majority of Americans: banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, enacting universal background checks, requiring safe storage of guns, and ending immunity for gun manufacturers. These measures are certainly not enough, but are definitely a start!

Similar to the “Strongman” that Jesus encountered, we too encounter diabolical forces that too are Legion and seemingly invincible. These include a powerful conglomerate of gun manufacturers, gun lobbyist, spineless and opportunistic politicians, as well as a fearful citizenry hiding behind locked doors and armed to the teeth!

But according to Jesus, he and those who follow him are far more powerful. It was Jesus who gave “permission” for the Empirical forces to go crashing over the cliff in their militaristic madness.

Now I must admit it does seem a bit odd to hear Jesus giving out advice on how to break in and successfully haul away someone else’s stuff. So, I guess this must be pretty serious business and at times, dire circumstances do require a more extreme responses!

As we have just recently been reminded, it’s the lives of our children that are at stake. To save them and our society, we must confront that seemingly irrepressible Legion of power and wealth, of evil demonic forces that are literally killing us! We must confront them, expose them and then we must take away their power in the name of Jesus!

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship
300 E. Oak St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524
(970) 412-7510