

I am thankful for those people who made the hard but faithful choice to follow Jesus in the community where they had been planted, even when they weren't sure what the outcome would be.

When I think about the various communities I am a part of, this one here at this church is one of the most important. Our community isn't perfect, but we are healthy, and thriving, and we try to help people flourish in their faith. The leadership here celebrates that thriving just about every time we gather together. We give thanks to God for our members and participants who work out their differences in healthy ways. For people who try to offer a genuine welcome to new folks. For people who celebrate noise in the sanctuary that comes from children. For those who support members in the hospital and their caregivers. This community is also changing and growing. We had 23 new members last year and we're excited for more folks who are getting involved here, too. We don't get everything right. We certainly make mistakes, too. But we try not to allow those things to break our sense of unity in Christ. The life of faith here feels abundant and joy-filled because of each person who is here, in person and online. Most especially because God is here with us.

You know we're in the season of thinking about how we give tangible financial gifts to the church. It's usually no one's favorite season. But I, and the people who lead our stewardship effort, have really come to enjoy it. One, because it's a time to celebrate this community and give thanks for all the lives being touched by our ministries. Two, because we approach it with a sense of abundance, not scarcity and fear. Two years ago, I sat in our church administrator's office and shed tears because my family had to reduce our pledge for that year, when my husband went back to school. I felt ashamed, and like I couldn't ask you to increase your gift if I wasn't. Our administrator, Kari, looked at me and asked what I would tell a church member in the same position. Which was of course, to do what we needed to do to get by, and then, when we were able, to increase our gift again. That's what we did and are doing. I'm looking forward to pledging this year. Matt has finished school, is working; so we'll be able to increase our gift again. Kari reminded me to approach things with that sense of abundance, not scarcity. She reminded me that abundance is not only about the numbers. It's also about the intentions and commitment to each other.

This year, I hope all of us will plan to stick with this community, and to share something of what God has given us. I hope that those gifts will proclaim what Jesus sent the man to proclaim to his community: how much the Lord has done for us, and all the mercy God has shown us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church  
of Royal Oak

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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

*"The Abundance of Community"*

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Mark 5:1-20

At the beginning, the man in our story had the opposite of an abundant life. His life was nothing but misery. By the practices of his culture, he had been deemed 'unclean' and was forced to abandon his family. He lived alone, in the cemetery, howling at night. He was a danger, and no one could stop him from hurting himself or others. He was left with no neighbors, no community to call his own. We can speculate about what was 'actually' going on in his life. Perhaps this man had been afflicted with a mental illness. Perhaps evil is an embodied thing that afflicts individuals, in addition to whole societies. Perhaps his character served as a literary symbol for the occupying Roman troops in ancient Palestine and the oppression they caused.

No matter what explanation we choose, there was some death-dealing power in the man that was causing his suffering. For short, we call it 'demons.' Somehow, as they often did in scripture, these demons recognized Jesus. Jesus saw them for who they were right back. And then, Jesus made quick work of healing the man from this affliction. Despite the demons' protests, Jesus banished the legion of demons into the pigs who all ran off the cliff, lemmings-style. Which is such a great image of the way such powers self-destruct in the face of Jesus' power.

We want this to be the conclusion of the story. For the man to go out and claim his newfound gift of abundant life! Many of Jesus' healing stories do end that way. Jesus heals. The person is made well. End of story. But not so here. A lot of the important stuff seems to take place *after* the man was healed. The people who saw what happened told others. Neighbors came to gape at the man who had once been tormented, who now appeared totally normal. The swine herders complained about how their entire livelihood had charged headfirst into the lake and drowned. Townspeople heard all this and they were afraid of what it meant for them. So they begged Jesus to get out of town.

This community had an opportunity to recognize the gift of abundant

life. But instead of celebrating the man's health and safety, they focused on the *economics* of abundance; or their own livelihoods. Sure, this guy was better and his howling wasn't keeping them up at night, but how were they going to make a living now that the pigs were gone? It turns out the people would have much rather had a booming economy than the well-being of one who had been struggling. Or, maybe they just preferred the status quo to anything that shook up their neighborhood.

For the townspeople and for us, it's easy to get confused about what it means to have an *abundant life*. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus' intent was for us to *live well*. But living well absolutely does not mean to be well-off financially, or to have a great house, or a secure job, or really any of the things that mark success in our society. Living well means to come near to the realm of God—where we notice the presence of God, where God gifts us with grace and mercy, where the world is being set right from injustice and misery. And even where sacrifice can be beautiful and meaningful. Abundant life is a life filled with gratitude that recognizes everything we have as a gift from God.

Jesus saw that this town was not ready for that kind of good news. So he started to get back into his boat and head out, just like people were asking him to do. But then the man—healed and whole—made a request of Jesus: "let me come with you. Let me follow you." Jesus had already told a number of fishermen, "follow me," and they had. Jesus had honored the request of the demons to go into the swine. He was honoring the people's wish for him to leave. Surely he would honor the man's request. But not this time. Jesus surprised the man: "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

What should we make of this? Was it cruel that Jesus sent the man back to the people who were so upset by his healing? Why wouldn't Jesus allow someone who wanted to be with him to do so? Was this a literary way to explain that Gentiles, like the man and the swine herders, would eventually receive the good news, after Jesus' resurrection? Maybe. But perhaps Jesus was saying that the gospel actually calls us deeper into our own communities. Jesus knew that this man had an opportunity to share what the Lord had done for him, and to share faith among people who had none. Jesus knew that abundant life can be revealed when a community works through its differences, when we find reconciliation in our relationships.

So Jesus sent the man back to his community to have those conversations, to listen and share with his neighbors, to allow the people who'd been afraid of him to get to know who he really was. Did that feel fair to the man? I don't know. But to Jesus, it was a faithful thing to ask and the right

way for the man to live into the faith he was discovering.

Community is a beautiful concept. When communities are healthy and strong, they can help us be and become the people God has called us to be. Caring communities can urge us to change and grow. They're places we find relationships, make connections, lean on the members for support. Community can also be challenging to live out and to live well. Like the man in the story, we may not always like our community or want to go be with them. The community of our Presbytery, which is the group of Presbyterian churches in Metro Detroit, is a hot mess right now. And by 'the Presbytery' that really just means the pastors and members of all those churches together. The issues are many: People don't trust each other. They're afraid to say the wrong thing, for fear someone will lambast them or worse. People make accusations against each other. There is no one source of these problems. Systemic racism is a piece of it. Unhealthy individuals are another. And there's a lot of fear. Fear of the future, fear of churches closing, fear of becoming, or maybe already being, irrelevant. Some people are just bowing out, choosing not to participate in the Presbytery community anymore. But myself and Pastor Neeta and every elder on our Session has actually made a promise to be a friend to our colleagues and to participate in that community, in some small way. So there we see Jesus, calling us deeper into community. Sending us to be with people who can be challenging. Jesus is asking us to trust him, that something faithful, something grace-filled, something new can and will emerge from that very broken community.

Staying in community is one of the hardest and most transformative practices we can take in our faith. Back in the 1990's, the Presbyterian Church was not very welcoming of LGBTQ+ folks. There were lots of loud and often nasty debates about whether they could be ordained as deacons, elders, or pastors. Many LGBTQ people left the church at that time for more welcoming denominations, or for no church at all. But one group was formed at that time called the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. They were devoted to staying in the community of the Presbyterian Church, but working to change policies, as well as hearts and minds, to allow the full inclusion and welcome of LGBTQ people. They heard Jesus calling them to stay in community. Even as they already knew themselves to be whole and beloved children of God, just as they were, they heard Jesus calling them to stay in a community that wasn't ready to affirm their identity. To stay in relationship, to keep talking, to share honestly, to press for equity. So they, along with many others, continued to minister and participate in the wider community of the church. And eventually, the welcome has widened and their gifts have been affirmed. There's still work to do, but