

Old Testament lesson – Isaiah 65:1-9
New Testament lesson – Luke 8:26-39

Help: Not Wanted

Last week I was riding my bike south towards town and I passed a cyclist riding in the opposite direction. I noticed he was not wearing a helmet. On my way back home I saw him stopped next to the road, standing by his bike. I pulled over, stopped and said, “I have just one word to say to you: helmet.”

He responded, “I have just two words for you,” and I was bit worried about what he was going to say. Sometimes people don’t like strangers meddling in their business. Fortunately, his two words were, “Flat tire.”

We talked a bit, and I told him my helmet had saved my life on that very road. Then I rode home, returned with the truck, and took him and his bike home. Sometimes meddling in someone’s business is welcome.

A couple weeks ago, we had our dishwasher repaired – finally. It broke down before we went on our trip, so at least we had a couple weeks when it was not a problem. We have a manual dishwasher, but that one doesn’t like washing dishes and sometimes complains about not having enough help. But I’m afraid of breaking dishes. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

While the repairman was working, I watched for a while and asked a question or two, then I left him alone. I thought of something I saw some years ago. You’ve probably seen something like it. A plumber’s rates were “Labor, \$25/hour; \$35/hour if you watch; \$50/hour if you help.” It makes sense. If you could offer any worthwhile help, you’d be doing the work yourself.

I’ve done a little plumbing over the years. I’ve changed out valves, repacked glands in old faucets we have, cleaned out a drain with a large rented snake. When we lived in Kentucky, I installed a wet bar in the basement. The previous owner had the bar sitting there close to water pipes but not connected. I figure it would help the house sell.

I thought that because even though Kentucky is full of Baptists who are officially opposed to drinking alcohol, Kentucky is also the home of more than 80 distilleries. The Baptists are well-known for what they are against, things like drinking, smoking, and gambling.

I was at a ministers’ meeting once when Kentucky was considering a lottery. At the meeting someone warned that we needed to stop this, because the devil was trying to get his foot in the door. I said, “Excuse me, but there are two horse tracks just up the road where betting is legal. The devil isn’t trying to get his foot in the door; he’s already sitting in the parlor.”

This fellow actually said, “That’s different.” He didn’t explain how. I supposed it was a Southern notion, something a Yankee would not understand. Obviously, my help was not wanted on this issue.

Thinking back over your life, how many times have you refused help? How many times have you offered to help and someone said, “No, that’s all right. I can handle it.”

There are times, of course, when other people allow us to help. And there are times when we do accept help – if it’s offered. But it is less often that we seek help when we could probably use it.

Some situations obviously call for help. If your combine has become stuck in mud, you probably call for some help to pull it out. If you know you are having a heart attack or a stroke or you’ve broken a bone, you know you need medical help. But when I had my stroke, I did not realize that was what it was. I thought I was tired and needed a nap. I thank God Annette had a better sense of my need for medical help.

What is it with so many of us that we do not seek or accept help? Is it that we don’t want to be a bother to people? Do we think we should be able to do everything on our own?

We are the people who are most irritated by those other folks who act as if the world owes

them everything. Those are the people who propose guaranteed incomes for every one, or demand minimum wages that will allow them to buy a \$300,000 home and drive an expensive car and have a \$30 coffee every morning. Of course, that sort of person rejects help from people who like us who try to help them how understand how life works.

Now, what happens when God enters this mess? Well, it does not improve as much as one might hope. Take a look at the first verse of our OT lesson: *I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that was not called by my name.*

That is a slightly different translation than the one I read, which ends the verse like this: *"Here am I, here am I," to a nation that did not call on my name.*

The difference seems insignificant, but it might not be. Bible scholars disagree on this verse, regarding what nation God is talking about. The following verses clearly refer to Israel, a nation that *is* clearly called by God's name; his name is the "El" part of "Israel." So if the translation is "a nation not called by my name," v.1 refers to a Gentile nation or nations. But if it is "a nation that did not call on my name," he is probably talking about Israel.

I am not good enough with Hebrew to follow the scholarly arguments about the grammar and syntax used here. In Romans 10:20 Paul's use of this passage indicates that he thinks it refers to Gentiles. Paul's ministry was mainly to Gentiles, so we might consider him a bit biased. But we also accept his ministry and writings as divinely inspired, so the bias would originate with God.

So let's consider that the verse refers to Gentiles. God was ready to offer help to Gentiles. But there is no indication that they took him up on the offer in any general way. So we can move on to verse 2 and we immediately return to Israel's rejection of God's help. Israel was rebellious, they walked in a way that was not

good, followed their own devices. They provoked God. They practiced pagan rituals and made themselves unclean by sitting in tombs and eating swine's flesh – pork. If you're ever with a Jewish person who eats a bacon cheeseburger, that's who this is talking about. The cheese and the bacon both make that burger unclean according to rabbinic rules about what is kosher.

God also chastises those who proclaim their own holiness, possibly the original "holier-than-thou" people. I imagine many of us have met such people. They stay away from persons they perceive to be less righteous in their lifestyle, and they make no secret that this is their opinion of those persons. Of course, sometimes we just do so quietly. It is perhaps one of the worst common characteristics of most Christian churches in general and Christians specifically.

It does no good for us to protest this as an unfair generalization of ourselves. If it were not so, I am certain there would be many more people in churches all across this country this morning. How many people within five miles of this building will not be in any church this morning? Are they bad people? Of course they are. Are we holier than they are? No, at least not on our own. And God is ready to be sought by them; he is the one who makes a person holy through Jesus. Someone needs to let them know that.

But we who think we are holier than others are a smoke in God's nostrils, a fire that burns all day. In the context, that is not a good thing. It is not like the aroma of an offering that is pleasing to God, a sacrifice offered in humility and obedience. God's plans for such people are not pleasant. But for those who behave differently, who accept the help he offers, his plans are much more pleasant. Again we see the promise of good pastures and a place for herds to live comfortably.

Our NT lesson is placed immediately after Jesus calmed the storm while they were in a boat on the lake. As the wind was filling the boat with water, the disciples certainly were anxious for

Jesus to help. That was not so much the case with the people in the place where they landed in the lesson.

They came upon a man to whom they could well have said, “Stay away from us; we are holier than you.” Since the man was possessed by a legion of demons, it would have been true. Even though the people of this region were not Jewish, they also had enough sense to stay away from this wild man. He lived among the tombs, just as God had accused his people of doing in our OT lesson. He was undoubtedly spiritually unclean.

As Jesus came into view, the demons recognized him, and therefore the man asked what he was going to do. He did not want Jesus to torment him. Now, think about that request. The demons tormented this man constantly, day and night, night and day, 24/7/365. It was *they* who did not want Jesus to torment *them*. Jesus had apparently told them to leave the man just before they made their request. Then Jesus asked the demon’s name. It called itself and its colleagues “Legion.” In a Roman legion there were at least 4000 soldiers, so there were a lot of evil spirits in this man.

There is no hint given here as to how a person arrives in that condition. But the only cure is through Jesus. It was fortunate for this man that the only cure for his condition came to him, with an offer of help. The man himself seems to play no willing part in the exchange until he is freed from the demonic influence.

Jesus allows the demons to enter a herd of pigs, rather than the abyss. The abyss seems to have been a bottomless pit, a place of temporary storage for demons until their final punishment. Perhaps they feared falling endlessly until the time of their final punishment. Whatever the reason, they did not want to go there. And for whatever reason, Jesus allowed them to enter the swine, which then drowned themselves.

What happened after this was particularly interesting. The men tending the swine ran away and reported all this to other people. The other

people came out to see what was going on. They found this former wild man, this demon-possessed and -controlled maniac, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

What would you do in their situation? Wouldn’t you be the least bit curious how this came to pass? Wouldn’t you want to have someone around who could protect you with whatever power he had to accomplish this?

My first thought is, what fools they were to send him away as they did! He cured a man who had been nothing but trouble for years, and they are afraid. Well, after all, he also destroyed a herd of swine. That’s a lot of food, a lot of wealth. Sure, he wouldn’t have eaten the meat, but what about them?

What were they really afraid of? Was he going to convert them to Judaism so they would not eat pork anymore? Was he going to drive evil things out of their lives, maybe things they did not think were evil? Was he going to change *them*?

I think that was what frightened them. Jesus carried within himself the power to change people and things. He could have helped them with many things, I’m sure. But his help was not wanted.

How much do we want help from Jesus? How many little things, or even big things, do we have in our lives that Jesus would change if we allow him to help? I won’t even try to name such things, because if I miss yours, you’ll think it doesn’t belong on the list. But if you just now thought, “Well, surely he can’t mean such and such,” that is probably *exactly* what I mean. I just don’t know what it is for you. But you know. I know mine and you know yours. If we compared our lists it might be a good contest to see whose list has more items.

But those are the things Jesus wants to help us with. They could be positive items – things we say, or think, or do that we should not; sins of commission if you will. They could be negative items – things that are missing from our lives that should be present when we follow Jesus; sins of omission.

It is a humbling thing for people who like to be self-sufficient to realize just how much help we need from God every single day. How much of our activity, how much of our lives, do we engage in without consideration of God? How much help do we turn down without realizing it? How often is God ready to be sought by us, but we do not ask for him? How often do we fail to hear him telling us, “Here I am,” and so we don’t call on his name?

Sometimes we live as if we don’t want God’s help, until the desperate times come upon us. Then we’re ready to call upon God, either for help or to declare our anger and disappointment.

Like the Gerasene demoniac, we are in need of help from Jesus; not in the same way, I hope, but help nevertheless. There is not a single soul here who is perfect, so we could all use some help changing something. And the more we let Jesus change us, the more likely we are to declare how much God has done for us. And maybe that’s what makes us afraid, like the people who saw what Jesus had done. Maybe the

fear of change is what keeps us from asking God’s help more than we do, especially for those things we just want him to leave alone. But those are probably the ones we most need his help to change.

God offers us help. He has sent us his Holy Spirit, sometimes called the Helper. God is always here, wherever you are. He offers us help all the time on everything imaginable. Let’s not let his help go unwanted. Amen.