

St. Paul's, Concord  
June 22 & 23, 2019  
Luke 8:26-39  
Rev. Kate Atkinson

When we were still living in England, we used to pass a large farm not far from where we lived. There was a field full of pigs, and, right in the middle, a pigsty with a huge sign on its roof that said "EAT BRITISH PORK." I always felt so sorry for those poor pigs – and I was very glad they couldn't read!

"Charlotte's Web" was one of my favorite books when I was a child. I was in total agreement with Charlotte that Wilbur was "Some Pig!" And when Alex was little, and the movie, "Babe" came out, we must have watched it more than twenty times. Every night, for years, I sang the same lullaby to Alex that the farmer sang to his little piglet in that movie.

And I'm not the only one. Teacup pigs, potbelly pigs, even full-size farm pigs are popular pets these days; James Taylor even wrote a song about his pet pig, Mona.

The point is a lot of people like pigs. So it's rather disturbing to read an account of Jesus sending a bunch of demons into a herd of pigs, causing them to jump off a cliff and drown. Why couldn't the demons have gone into a pack of rats, or a swarm of carpenter ants?

Like so much of what we read in scripture, context is essential to understanding our gospel passage. This was first century Palestine; there were no Wilburs or Babes back then; there was no anthropomorphizing of pigs, or keeping them as pets. They were simply pigs – and for the Jewish people, they were an unclean animal, unfit for consumption and useless as a farm animal.

So why is there a handy herd of pigs in our gospel passage? And what is Jesus doing in close proximity to those animals that are rejected by Jewish law?

It probably won't surprise you to hear that Jesus is, yet again, breaching boundaries. This time he's gone to the country of the Gerasenes, on the opposite side of the lake to Galilee, his home region. This is Gentile territory, and Gentiles have no aversion to raising, or eating, pigs. In fact pig farming constitutes an important source of income to the locals.

So the first significant element of this story is that Jesus and his disciples are knowingly entering a forbidden district, inhabited by animals and people that their religion and culture despise. And, although it isn't stated explicitly, it seems as though Jesus is drawn to that particular location for the very purpose the gospel passage describes – to heal a man, a Gentile, who is possessed by demons. That man even meets Jesus off his boat, the moment he disembarks.

This is the only account in Luke's gospel of Jesus carrying out a miraculous healing in a foreign territory, but, in the very next chapter, Jesus sends out his twelve disciples, to travel far and wide, visit strange places, to overpower demons, cure diseases and bring healing, and to proclaim the Kingdom of God. In the following chapter he commissions seventy more of his followers to do the same. (Luke 9:1-2; 10:1)

So Jesus' actions, in the country of the Gerasenes, were intended to set an example for the disciples he encouraged and taught during his ministry on earth, and for every disciple who's followed his way since that time – including us. And the central character in this lesson, often referred to as a “demoniac,” is as significant as the location.

The man was kept chained up and under guard in the cemetery at the outskirts of the town – partly for his own protection, but most certainly because the townspeople were afraid of him. He was out of his mind – unable to wear clothes, and possessed with such superhuman strength that he would periodically break free of his chains and escape into the wild. And, of course, “possessed” is the operative word here. Luke tells us that not just one but many demons had entered this man and had complete control of him.

There are numerous places in scripture where people are described as “demon possessed.” Again, it's important to understand that description in the context of a culture that had little knowledge of the medical conditions we can identify today. Schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder, mania, and other mental illnesses; epilepsy, spasticity, even deafness and blindness, were little understood, largely feared, and frequently put down to demon possession.

It follows that the healings carried out by Jesus and his disciples, were viewed, and described, as exorcisms. When the seventy apostles returned from their mission (in Luke, chapter 10), they reported joyfully to Jesus, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” (Luke 10:17)

There among the tombs, in the country of the Gerasenes, whether Jesus effected a miraculous healing of a man suffering from severe mental illness, or whether he actually cast out demons, the result was the same. The man became calm; he got dressed, and he sat peacefully at Jesus' feet. And that caused almost as much unease among the townspeople as his previous condition had!

But that unease had as much to do with what had happened to the herd of pigs – if not more. Once again, we can't know for certain whether Jesus actually exorcized demons from the man and then sent them into the pigs, whether there was some other dramatic event that caused the herd to panic and leap to their death, or whether that part of the story was an embellishment added to emphasize the extraordinary events of that day. What we do know, because the account makes it clear, is that there are significant consequences when Jesus is at work in the world.

When transformation happens, in the name of Jesus, it can intrude on our safe and predictable lives. Even when it's obvious that someone's life has been improved by that holy act, that someone has been released from some form of torment or imprisonment, we can still find ourselves worrying about how our own lives may be affected.

With the apparent loss of a herd of pigs, the people of the Gerasenes suffered a huge blow to their livelihood. Yes, their neighbor had been restored to sanity, and yes, he would now be able to care for himself and contribute to society, but at what cost? It's not surprising that the townspeople want Jesus out of there as quickly as possible.

As people of faith, called to continue Jesus' ministry in a world of great need, we encounter "demons" every day. We call them by different names: addiction, homelessness, domestic strife, grief, loneliness; the list goes on and on. And when we confront those demons, when we do our best to bring healing and release, we're answering Jesus' call to proclaim the Kingdom of God. We pray for that Kingdom to exist – "on earth as it is in heaven" – every time we say the Lord's Prayer, and we are the ones who make it happen, through selfless, generous, loving acts.

But the Kingdom of God is messy. It can disrupt our life and place unexpected demands on our time, our energy, our privacy. Think of the story Terry Irwin shared with us last week. He answered a call to shepherd three African sisters as they adjusted to their new life in Concord. In doing this, he and Cynn timer sacrificed a pattern of life they'd grown accustomed to. Instead of enjoying comfortable retirement together, they were suddenly spending many hours a week teaching English, helping with job applications, giving rides. But you only had to look at the faces of the sisters who came to hear Terry's story, you only had to hear Terry speak, with such joy and affection, of his new African/American family, to know that it was all worthwhile.

Our gospel story isn't about cruelty to pigs; it's about compassion for our fellow human beings. It's about having the courage to enter unknown territory, to recognize another's suffering, and to do whatever we can to relieve that suffering, whatever the consequences may be in our own lives. Because, as well as recognizing that we've helped free a fellow human being from their personal demons, through the love instilled in us by our God of love, we also discover that the Kingdom of God, in all its messiness, unpredictability, and heart-stopping beauty, is the only place we want to be.