

Sermon for June 23, 2019  
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church  
Ps. 42; Luke 8:26-39  
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

*May the Holy Spirit fill these words with your message, Jesus Christ, our Healer and our Guide. Amen.*

## Pigs and Demons

Our administrative assistant, Bonita, asked me this week if I was preaching on the “deviled ham” text. I asked her what that was, and she said, “You know that passage where the demons get into the pigs and turn them into deviled ham.” I had never heard that phrase before but it fits because the interesting thing about this morning's Good News is the pigs. Every time I've shared this passage and asked a group what strikes people, someone always mentions the fate of the poor pigs. Let's get the pigs out of the way.

Culturally, in Jesus' time, and among many religious Jewish people today, pigs were considered unclean, taboo, even abhorrent. No good Jewish soul would get near a pig or even consider raising pigs. Tombs also were unclean. In fact, tombs were whitewashed to be sure the living stayed clear of the dead. The followers of Jesus believed that demons roamed these desolate places seeking refuge. The Jewish audience hearing this story would have rejoiced that a herd of pigs, along with demons, was destroyed. As fascinating as the pigs may be, they are not what this story is about.

On the surface, this episode in Jesus' ministry is quite simple. In Luke's gospel, this is Jesus' first foray into Gentile land where the “otherness” of the Gentiles is made clear by setting the story in a graveyard with a crazed man living near a herd of pigs. And yet Jesus, a faithful, practicing Jew, goes there for one purpose—a healing.

Once out of his boat, Jesus is met by the demoniac who calls him by name, an ironic twist since the disciples are still wondering who Jesus is, despite the fact he just previously calmed the roaring seas. Jesus casts out the demons who enter the pigs, who drive them crazy, and they drown. If we stop to imagine this scene, we can understand why all the people from the countryside want to come see what had happened, which they do, and what they see scares them: the demoniac, fully clothed and in his right man.

Unlike so many others that Jesus heals, this man begs to become one of his disciples and follow him, but Jesus has healed him for a purpose: to be an apostle and take the message of what the Lord has done for him back into Gentile country so that the message of Jesus Christ might spread to all.

What a colorful, amazing story of the grace of God and the utmost compassion of Jesus Christ. But what do the pigs and demons have to do with us, highly intelligent, self-reliant, rational people living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? We believe in pigs; demons, not so much. Just as the possessed man asks Jesus, "What have you to do with me," so we might ask about demons. "What do demons have to do with us?" Jesus, I believe, would answer "plenty."

According to Merriam-Webster, a demon is "an evil spirit" and "a source or agent of evil, harm, distress, or ruin." Some synonyms include ghost, phantom, poltergeist, shade, shadow, and specter. Halloween lingo? No. These words describe the realities of our souls and psyches. Over a lifetime, the number of demons that attack us and try to seek refuge in the desolate places of our lives are legion, too numerous to count. But we don't want to admit to our own demons, ghosts, and shadow sides. We'd rather talk about the pigs.

While we may not believe in, or understand, demon possession, we are invited by this passage to take a step back and look at the reality of the demons--those agents of evil, harm, distress, or ruin--all around us and even within us. Over the course of my own life, and particularly in regard to ministry, I've witnessed demons, many of them living in churches and taking up residence in the desolate places of pastors and members. A former member, a beautiful woman in her 70's, took her life because the demon of depression was too much to bear any longer. A young man in his early twenties hanged himself on the church property because the demons of his bi-polar illness defeated him. One of our best friends, a talented lawyer, shot himself after his marriage failed because of his substance abuse which he could not control. Suicide becomes a very tempting demon when one's life feels like that of this demoniac, wandering in the graveyard and feeling utterly alone.

I've witnessed other demons, too, demons that, unlike mental illnesses, actually can be chosen and catered to. I've seen the demon of possessiveness take over people who don't want "their" church to be any different than it was one hundred years ago and who turn a deaf ear to the call to reform in order to grow God's kingdom. I've witnessed the demon of bigotry where those who are "not like us" are not welcomed into fellowship, and I've come face to face with the demon of gossip trying to destroy a person out of malice, yet another demon. All of these demons, and more, want to thrive in church settings, where one would hope the light would shine too brightly to attract demons.

In our society, the demons run rampant. Some of their names are Jealousy, Bitterness, Self-righteousness, Intolerance, Ego, Power, Injustice, Fear, Pride, Gossip, Divisiveness, Greed, and Slander. They delight in causing harm, hurt, and even ruin to us and to others.

In our families, we may find the demons of Distrust, Worry, Misunderstanding, Abuse, Selfishness, Cut-off, and Betrayal. What is the toll of those demons on our personal relationships? And in our own lives, we either wrestle with or entertain our personal demons. You know their names, as I know mine. Wherever the Light wants to dwell, you can be sure demons are lurking in the shadows, waiting to extinguish it. But we don't want to talk about or challenge these demons, not the demons of society or churches or families, and definitely not our own. It's easier just to learn to live with them.

Yet this passage teaches us that Jesus will come to us, as well. "What have you to do with us, Jesus, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century sitting in the pews of St. Andrew Church?" Jesus answers, "I want to heal you." So why our reluctance to name our demons? Why our desire to hold onto something that perhaps makes us feel better in some way but keeps us stuck, wandering around in our own tombs? Maybe it's because if we admit to our demons, if we own our shadows, if we truly confess our sins, then we have to decide to let them all go. And, if we let them go, we will have to change. And change is scary.

What do the people from around the country do when they see the crazed man is now normal? Do they rejoice in his healing? Do they praise Jesus for his powers? No. They ask Jesus to leave them because they are afraid. If Jesus can heal a man that low, how might he change them? They do not want to be healed, or changed, or touched by the power of Christ because they are more comfortable with their demons. It is so much easier to simply live with those demons of unforgiveness, or fear, or anger, or self-criticism than to reach that potential for which we all were made. The Gentiles send Jesus away, and Jesus does not argue: "So he got in the boat and left." Jesus does not stay where he is not welcomed.

But there is one grateful person in this story, one person who praises Jesus for this change and that is, of course, the demoniac. In a surprise move, his plea to follow Jesus while all of his kinsfolk want Jesus gone is denied. Jesus has healed this man for a purpose: to go and tell others what God has done for him. A former demoniac becomes the first apostle to the Gentiles. If Jesus can use someone like that, if Jesus will go into the unclean mess of that man's life, do not dare to think he does not have compassion and a purpose for each one of us, as well.

The Good News this morning is that Jesus' compassion leads him to cross a sea to reach one single possessed person, and the power of his word vanquishes the demons and restores a man to health and wholeness. Jesus will do no less for each one of us, if we will let him.

We don't have to be part of the demon-party. With Christ's help and Christ's word, we can uninvite our demons and send them into the pigs. We can also model Jesus and go into the tomblike places of others' lives—those in nursing homes and in hospitals; those

who are sitting alone or in grief; those who feel shut-off and cast off, those in prison, and shine the Christ-light in this church, in our families, in our society, and in our own souls so brightly that no demon will want to abide there. Then we can ask, "What do you want with me, Jesus?" and hear him say, "I want you to tell others what your Lord has done for you."

Thanks be to God.