

The problem with Pigs
Menno Mennonite Church
June 28, 2020

Purpose: To explore the work of Jesus' encounters and miracles

Message: When Jesus enters into a situation, the unpredictable, and often, the uncontrollable happens

Scripture: Luke 8: 26-29

Synopsis: Jesus, when he comes to the scene, causes things to happen. His very presence comes as a shock for many. He just shows up on the other side of the lake and is presented with a man who is in an obvious distress. His cover is blown as he is loudly declared as the Son of God. He does what comes naturally and heals the man and restores him to his right, healthy mind. And then an odd thing happens. When you expect him to be hailed for the hero that he is to the man and to the community, he is asked by the community to leave. He has disturbed the way things are and have been, and he cannot be welcomed any more. They plead to be relieved of his presence yet again. And this should not surprise us.

We are not quite sure what to do with a Jesus that would change our lives, because we are not always sure that we want to change. Yet we are invited time and again to receive Jesus even into those areas where we least expect him.

Scripture: Luke 8:26-39

26 Then they arrived
at the country of the Gerasenes,
which is opposite Galilee.

27 As he stepped out on land,
a man of the city who had demons met him.

For a long time he had worn no clothes,
and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.

28 When he saw Jesus,
he fell down before him

and shouted at the top of his voice,
“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?
I beg you, do not torment me”—

29 for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man.
(For many times it had seized him;
he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles,
but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

30 Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?”

He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him.

31 They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

32 Now there on the hillside
a large herd of swine was feeding;
and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these.
So he gave them permission.

33 Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine,
and the herd rushed down the steep bank
into the lake and was drowned.

34 When the swineherds saw what had happened,
they ran off and told it in the city
and in the country.

35 Then people came out to see what had happened,
and when they came to Jesus,

they found the man from whom the demons had gone
sitting at the feet of Jesus,
clothed and in his right mind.

And they were afraid.

36 Those who had seen it told them
how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.

37 Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes
asked Jesus to leave them;
for they were seized with great fear.

So he got into the boat and returned.

38 The man from whom the demons had gone
begged that he might be with him;
but Jesus sent him away, saying,

39 “Return to your home,
and declare how much God has done for you.”

So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

We know how this story goes. It is a miraculous tale, and they fit a pattern. The healing speaks well as we so often look for our own healing. Like so many of the recounting of the miracles of Jesus, we know how the story goes, or at least ones like it. The afflicted encounter Jesus, reaching out in hope that even a word from the great one might do for them what has so long been desired. Jesus complies with their request, effects the healing, and all is well. Everyone is amazed by what they have witnessed, and they leave singing praises to God and to the person God has sent as Jesus convinces them once again who and what he is about. The person is grateful. The on lookers are amazed, and all is right with the world. That is what we expect. It is what miracles are all about after all—healing in the name of God to reveal what God is all about. It is the crowd-pleasing aspect of Jesus' ministry, and are told again by the gospel writers to reinforce what they are saying; that Jesus is the Son of God. This is how we tell these stories. It's their purpose from little on up. And that is good.

Jesus is not doing anything extraordinary in this encounter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Sometime before the story we read this morning, Jesus simply suggests to his disciples that they take a trip to the other side. Along the way, strange things start happening to them already. Luke tells us that a storm comes up on the sea while they were crossing. They are certain that they are going to die, and Jesus simply tells the storm to be still and it is. So already, the scene is set by Luke to plant the question in the disciple's mind "who is this guy?" Which is immediately answered by the afflicted man on the beach where they land: "Jesus, Son of the Most High, what have you do with us?" Seems clear enough, doesn't it? After some negotiation with Legion, Jesus commands them to come out and they do in a spectacular fashion, and the man is restored. All is well and everyone was amazed to tell the story.

But this is where the story changes. From here on in things get very different. We don't often read the whole story—the healing is the point so we get on with things after that. But curious things happen when Jesus shows up—dead people rise, the lame walk, the blind see—and the world looking on responds in their usual way when they encounter curious stuff. They freak out and try to make it all go away. While it might be easy to condemn people for this now that we have had 2000 or so years to get over the shock of the stuff that Jesus did, we have to be honest, it is probably the most human response anyone should reasonably expect. Because at the

end of the day, this is not how the world as we know it works. The lame struggle to get by. The blind stay blind. Dead people stay dead (except in horror films, but that is a whole other thing). When such foundational ways of the world of how things are start being called into question, nobody is comfortable, and strange things result. But as important as the promise of healing is in this story, I think the reaction of those who witness what has happened that makes the story significant. When you change the script, weird things happen.

Back in college, I was traveling with a friend in Washington DC to attend a seminar. We were staying with friends and riding public transit to the rather sketchy neighborhood that they lived in. One evening we were returning to the house after dark, we were targeted by a couple of guys who let us know that they had knives, and would like some money. I understood this to be a stick up so I dutifully reached for my wallet to comply with their demands—I am fairly compliant even to crooks apparently. Except they did not want my money—just my friend’s—and told me to put my money away. This seriously annoyed me. It wasn’t fair. I got mad and told them that if they were messing with my friend, they were messing with me too, and insisted that they rob me, all the time waving my cash in their faces. One of the thieves literally took my hand and guided the wallet back into my pocket, refusing to take my money. “Are you sure?” I asked them. “Yeah man, don’t worry about it” they said as they hurriedly walked away. I don’t entirely know why I responded this way, or why the thieves had a conscience about one person and not the other, besides the obvious. I was indignant that they would treat me this way. My pride was hurt that I was not good enough, or whatever enough to rob. In any case, I bet that I was one of the weirdest victims they ever came across. This is not how things are supposed to happen when you mug someone—it changes the script. They looked a little bit freaked out because what they thought would happen did not.

Jesus changes the script here and that makes all the difference. He is doing what people least expect, even though it is the most natural thing for him. The world changes for the possessed man, sure, but even more so for the villagers who hear of this wonderful, horrible event. They come out not to praise Jesus for curing this poor man, restoring him to health and to his family, but to plead with Jesus to leave. To leave now and not to come back. Not unlike the many voiced demons inside the man, they plead with Jesus to not upset their world that they have

grown so fond of and to leave and let them continue without the threat of Jesus in their midst, the threat of needing to change. As much good was done in this place, that good could not and would not be accepted because they could not wrap their heads around it. It is too scary to have the world as we know it changed in such drastic ways. I think we actually know what they might have meant.

In fairness, for them, the people of the town, this was a catastrophe. Their pigs just drowned—a business disaster to be sure. The man with whom they had struggled for years with suddenly and shockingly was changed. They must have been wondering what was going to happen next, and whose business as usual was about to be forever changed. Systems want stability. Jesus was in their midst and they knew that they had no way to control him. There is little doubt that they were glad to see Jesus and disciples get back on their boat and disappear into the mist again. Add to this that for this time and this place the man who was healed was considered the lowest of the low. He was unclean—possessed, dwelling around pigs, living in the tombs—all of which made him untouchable by the Jewish law. And it is this man that Jesus chooses to work with in turning Geneserete on its ear.

As much as we might not want to say so, we sometimes wish Jesus would go a way. We might invite Jesus to come in and change things, change us, but that does not always mean we are happy when it actually happens. Those things that haunt you, as tough as they are to deal with, is only part of the battle. There is a whole other consequence of change. When you change, your world changes too, and not everyone will be thrilled with the prospect. I have heard it time and again from my Alcoholic Anonymous friends. One of the hardest parts of recovery is encountering the judgement received by those judging the change. We can expect that those near and dear to us may well not always see what we need to be about in the here and now as what ought to be happening. As always the case, the only thing that we can really change in this world is ourselves. One of the best ways to change other people around me is for me to change how I respond to them first. By changing myself, they must respond, and it is there necessary response to the change in you that changes them. Sometimes their response is good; sometimes it is not. But part of riding ourselves of that would possess us, whatever it is, involves dealing with those who would rather nothing change at all.

Secondly, this principle also speaks to the need to think carefully about how we bring about change in our world, and how we help other people change. We must realize that changing individuals, as indispensable as that is, does not complete the change without our also reckoning with the systems that create the problems in the first place. The people of Geneserath are not bad people, nor should we think they are unfeeling about the possessed man. They saw only the unknown and the uncontrollable and they needed to put a stop to it. It happened then. It happens today. There are always obstacles to setting people free. The systems that are set up to benefit from keeping people mistrusting each other will always oppose that would make it possible for the status quo to change. Things are the way they are because there are those who benefit from the injustices of the world, whether they know it or not. This is why he is so dangerous. This is why he gets in trouble all the time. Because he is always dismantling what is, and making what should be, and that is always challenging, always scary. It is scary for the world. It is scary for us. We like the way things are, even if we might even know that it is not the best thing for us.

Freedom can be scary. It changes the script, and we are not always ready for that. Yet Jesus remains ready to call out what ever myriad demons we might be carrying and to heal all that wounds us so deeply. Sometimes we welcome the opportunity. Sometimes all we can do is ask Jesus to wait until we might be more ready, to go away, at least for now. But we must remember this: it is God who writes the script, and when God changes our world, as scary as it might be, we will be better for it.

May we approach the healing one with open hearts, willing minds, and fearless spirits who are willing to see the world change yet again. May this be our grace filled calling now and always. Amen.