

“When Pigs Fly”

(how ordinary communities get transformed)

In this morning's Gospel text (Luke 8:26-39), we hear a story about the disturbed (& disturbing) demoniac of the Gerasenes. He *used* to live in town, we're told, but now he's naked and homeless, living among the dead in the local graveyard. They say that he becomes wild, even dangerous, on occasion – harming himself when the demons seize him (see [Mark 5:1-20](#)). So they kept him bound and shackled. But still, he would break free & run – naked & screaming – into the wilderness. It may be hard for us to imagine such a miserable existence.

But Jesus heals him of his afflictions. And so, at the point in the story when *we* meet him, he is clothed and in his right mind. No longer crying out in pain & rage, but *sitting peacefully... and listening...* to the words of Jesus. He must have had many questions after all he'd been through.

When we meet persons who are suffering with serious afflictions, we can be fairly certain that – beneath all of their emotional turmoil & interpersonal conflicts & even acts of violence toward themselves or others – **there is a story** – a story with many chapters before the one that is unfolding before us right now. *We really don't know* the story beneath the troubled life of the Gerasene demoniac. We don't even know his real name. Perhaps instead of just continuing to call him “*the Gerasene demoniac*,” I'll call him “Gary.”

As it turns out, we actually **do** have a possible **clue** to Gary's own story. We find it in the **contrast** between how **Gary** responds – and how the more “ordinary” **townspeople** respond – to the healing presence of Jesus in their midst.

One of the timeless truths that we find surfacing again and again in the gospels is the mystery of Divine Grace – **the mystery that the grace that heals us and makes us whole – is absolutely free... and yet... being prepared to receive it is neither cheap, nor easy.** In fact, being prepared to receive the grace that heals could not be more costly or more difficult. Jesus tells us that it will cost us our very selves (Matthew 7:13-14; 10:37-39), that it will require us to let go of our attachments to “the things of this world” (Luke 18:22.) But, faced with Jesus, this was a price that Gary was ready & willing to pay (*perhaps because he had nothing left to lose*). But not the more “ordinary” townspeople. They wanted to get Jesus out of town *a.s.a.p.*, but **why?**

Well, one possibility is that there are certain **advantages** to having a highly troubled person around who never gets better. An age-old strategy – perhaps even the “first” strategy on earth – for coping with the **stress of guilt** is to deflect blame away, by creating a **scapegoat** outside of ourselves. Some vulnerable one who could be forced to bear all the community's sins.

Perhaps Gary had come to play this kind of role for the more “ordinary” people of the Gerasene community. Perhaps it was all too easy – when the “ordinary” people's sins were at risk of being exposed -- to simply blurt out: “*I didn't do it! Gary did!*” ... or the flipside of that: “*Gary made me do it!*” Who (*among the “ordinary” people*) wouldn't believe that and decide that they'd better chain Gary up again? **Especially** if the majority was very hungry to find a culprit. This process can become a kind of community ritual, and it is an ancient one.

But – if Gary were cleaned up & clothed & cared for until he was in his “right mind” – *everything*

would have to change. Then the actual guilty parties would have to **own** their own darkness, take responsibility for their own sins (*including their sins against Gary*), and repent. They would have to “empty” themselves of their self-importance in order to be filled with grace. In other words, they would have to do a lot of costly, and hard, work within themselves. Still, they wouldn't have to do it “all by themselves.” Unconditional Love was there, in the presence of Jesus, ready to inspire them to do the work. But they didn't **want** to be inspired to do the work. They wanted their “business as usual” to continue, because it seemed a much easier and far less costly way to feel good about themselves as a community. As long as **they** did not have to feel the pain of their own guilt and suffering, who cares how it affects Gary? Well, Jesus cares. And the One he calls 'Father' cares. And their Holy Spirit cares. The Trinity cares enough to disrupt the community's destructive “business as usual.” And, as we come to share in the Life of the Trinity, so do we.

What are the lessons for us in this gospel story?

It seems that we cannot “expose” our actual afflictions to the healing grace of God in Christ and, at the same time, “conceal” them. We cannot “own” them and, at the same time, “pass them off” onto someone else. It seems that for us to receive the Healing Grace that we need in our lives, we need to first set our scapegoats free. Grace is completely free, but receiving it is neither cheap nor easy. It is extraordinarily *humbling*, extraordinarily *hard* on that lifeless, egocentric part of us which is quite OK with having others suffer on our behalf (Mark 10:17-31). When we become very accustomed to using scapegoats to feel good about ourselves, it is not easy to slow down and stop that process – and to start actually **being ourselves** – to start actually **bearing** our own feelings and experiences and choices and actions, before the Gracious, All-Forgiving Presence of God. It can seem **so** much easier, **so** less costly, to just run Jesus out of town, and let things slowly drift back into the mediocrity, and the tyranny, of the “ordinary.”

But, as the gospel teaches us, it is always the humble path of receiving the Grace of God in Christ that is the path to real freedom. It is a path that, *from the outside*, seems **unbearably costly** and *difficult*. And, in ourselves alone, it is. But the Spirit of Christ **enriches** us from within, so that we can pay *even the most costly price*. The Spirit of Christ **empowers** us from within, so that we can take *even the most difficult steps*. This is the **mystery** of the Grace that is completely free, but neither cheap nor easy.

In the end, as we know from Luke's text, Jesus **did** in fact leave town. But before he did, he made sure that things would not easily regress to the way they were before. Because he **called** and **empowered** Gary to remain there, like a bit of “extraordinary” yeast, mixed into a very “ordinary” batch of dough. Gary becomes another “fool for Christ,” and perhaps the only one in town in his right mind. We don't know how it all turned out for that particular community, but we know that they now had **real hope** of **real transformation** available to them.

We live in a world which, for the most part, believes that this kind of community transformation will only happen “when pigs fly.” But they miss the point of the story.

So let's not follow their lead. Instead, let's reflect upon these things. Let's identify the scapegoats in our lives; in our church; in our society; in our world. And, by the Grace of God, let's set them free. So that we can **all** be healed of our afflictions, **all** grow to genuinely care for one another, and especially for the most vulnerable in our midst. Amen.