

Pentecost 2, 2025-06-22; Luke 8:26–39

Christ Church, Sparta, NC

Rev. Dr. Katherine A. Shaner

My Aunt and Uncle live on the family farm in Nebraska. As a kid, I spent summers going to “the farm” to play with my cousins. We would build houses among the bales in the hay barn, we would hunt the newest litter of kittens whose eyes were not yet open, we would go fishing for catfish in the Elkhorn River, and, my favorite, we would play with the baby pigs. My Aunt and Uncle were, for 30 years, primarily hog farmers, raising pigs from birth to market—and we saw all the realities of birth, life, death, hardship, and abundance that went along with that enterprise.

I have so many memories of those summers on the farm. Feeling how soft newborn pig hair was. Gently touching baby pig noses. Giggling at the floppy ears and curly tails. ...And, getting mucky in the pen. There is nothing more distinctive than the smell of pig muck. And if you’ve ever been around it, you also know that the smell clings to clothing, to hair, to your skin.

So our parents ALWAYS knew when we’d been in the pig pens when we came into the house. Sometimes we would come in for dinner (the noon meal) and I would hear my Aunt say from the kitchen: make sure you scrub those piggy hands, all the way up to the elbows! And you can imagine that, before we could go into town to the library, or to a friend’s house to play, or certainly to the little white, high-steepled country church on Sunday mornings, we were not allowed anywhere near the pig barns.

In fact, I remember the exasperation of the grownups, one Sunday, when my cousin and I went to the pig barn before anyone else was awake...necessitating a repeat of the previous evening’s shower and a scrubbing of our piggy hands. One simply did not go to church with piggy hands.

Piggy hands!

In this morning's gospel story, we encounter a bunch of people with piggy hands...let's take a look.

Jesus and his followers—who, just before this in Luke's gospel, were in a boat on the stormy sea of Galilee when Jesus calmed the wind and the rain—Jesus and his followers, after their turmoil at sea, come to a place called Gerasa. Most scholars think this is a real city, one of a group of ten cities on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee that had been founded by Greeks, centuries earlier, as Alexander the Great's empire increased. In other words, Jesus and the disciples find themselves in territory where their own cultural perceptions, tastes, theologies, and even ability to communicate would have been challenged. As Judeans—Jews—they were strangers in a Greek land.

As they come to the city from the shore, they meet a man who had obviously had a rough life. Possessed by demons, naked, living in mausoleum-style graves, regularly chained for his own protection, and at times driven into wild country without resources. Jesus, in fact, doesn't converse with the man at first, but rather with the demons. Legion, they name themselves...a Roman army term that designates a group of 5000–6000 soldiers.

So, when the demons, who name themselves after the Roman army, meet Jesus, the Jewish Messiah from Nazareth, in a Greek graveyard on the grassy shores of the Galilee...there is a cultural clash that is about to go down. Because, you see, the Greeks and the Romans, they loved their ham and bacon. Ok, so it was probably salt-pork and souvlaki...but still! One of the staple protein sources for both Roman armies and Greek cities was, in fact, pork. So the presence of a large herd of pigs would have been unremarkable...except that, these Judean/Jewish *visitors*, we can assume, were not so fond of the pigs. You see in the first century, Jewish religious laws prohibited eating pork of any kind, or even touching pigs.

But it wasn't just their religious scruples that would have made this herd of pigs uncomfortable for them...pigs were...are...well, just gross sometimes. They were dirty, smelly, and not at all hygienic. And having dealt with piggy hands often, I can kind of see the point of avoiding them.

So when the demons ask to be thrown into the pigs, thinking they are quite clever for finding a way to escape Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, we usually cheer at the clever bait and switch. The slimy, smelly pigs stampede down the cliff into the sea, while the demon possessed man finds both redemption and restoration. With empathetic joy we see him sitting, clothed, "in his right mind," Luke says. His piggy hands, so to speak, were scrubbed to the elbows and he was wearing his Sunday best.

This is the part of the story that we so often, rightly, focus on—the healing miracle and Jesus's power to speak against even the most intractable evils in individual lives; to bring healing and wholeness into broken lives...into our lives. Jesus's compassion with anyone who is haunted by trauma, who is pursued by addiction, who is imprisoned by violence, who is excluded from society—Jesus's unfathomable depth of compassion is at work in this story—and in our own stories. Thanks be to the Son of the Most High God.

But there's another part of this story that needs some attention. [my students hear me say this all the time] What's missing? Who's left out?

It's the piggy-handed preachers! Notice who, in Luke's story, hurries off to tell people about what Jesus has just done. It's not the disciples (as we might expect). It's the swineherds. It's the ones with piggy hands who run into the city,

into the neighborhoods, AND into the fields and farmhouses to tell people about Jesus. And Luke even uses the Greek verb *apaggelō* to describe the way they tell this news—*apaggelō*—the same verb that describes the news the shepherds proclaimed at Jesus’s birth, the same verb that describes Jesus’s preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, the same verb that describes Mary Magdalene’s news of the empty tomb. The piggy-handed swineherds are the ones who make Jesus’s power known in the city and in the countryside. These piggy-handed preachers—who didn’t even scrub their hands up to the elbows—are the ones who announce to everyone what Jesus has done.

Now, the swineherds were also in deep, deep trouble. They had lost the animals they were supposed to protect—their investments had just run off a cliff—the means by which they met their needs was drowned in the lake. And so their announcement, their preaching, probably wasn’t a smash hit with family or friends. Those who came out to see Jesus after hearing the story, perhaps came out of anger, out of a sense of needing to protect their lives and livelihoods from some dangerous visitor to their land—from someone different who had different values.

And then, when they find that the piggy-handed preachers were right. Jesus had healed the man whom they had tried to contain and protect for so many years. Jesus had sacrificed their livestock for the sake of freeing this man from his demons. Luke tells us, that they were “seized with a great fear.” It wasn’t that they were necessarily angry about the man’s healing. Or angry that Jesus’s work had destroyed their herds. (Although, you can imagine both might have been the case.) Their fear—their biggest fear—was the enormity of divine justice and compassion. They saw a power of compassion embodied in Jesus—a power that didn’t make sense for the way they *thought* God was at work in the world around them. And it

was a power they would never have encountered, except for piggy-handed preachers.

Luke's story asks us to wrestle with our own lives of faith—with our own perceptions of what it means to live out justice and compassion not just in a heavenly kingdom, but right here, in our daily lives, as piggy-handed preachers. This morning's story of Jesus's power calls us to reckon with the ways we might be afraid to see Jesus at work in our own lives and in the larger community around us. This morning's story of piggy-handed preachers challenges us to think about what our own vocation, our own call might be—how do we proclaim the Gospel, the compassion of God, in *our* world?

Every encounter we have with Jesus—every encounter we have with Jesus, God's embodied wisdom in the world, compels us to preach—and by preaching I don't mean standing right here in this pulpit, I mean speaking, acting, and enacting the message that God's justice and compassion every in everyday life. Just like the swineherders and the man among the tombs, just like those who came to hear Jesus preach, just like those of us here on Sunday morning—every encounter we have with Jesus compels us to go back into the places of our world where a new thing needs to happen, to tell others about the ways that Jesus has championed the most vulnerable—to find our own courage in the midst of life's most vulnerable moments, to go into the city and the countryside and preach with piggy hands.