

Sermon on Luke 8:26-39
2nd Sunday after Pentecost, June 23, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace....

Like most Minnesota Lutherans, with relatives in neighboring states, I have ancestors who settled in North Dakota, in a town called Oakes. My grandfather's brother, Otto Erlandson Sr. began farming there after World War I. His grandson Tim, my second cousin, still operates the same farm with his wife Barb, and son Chris. When Tim was a young man, he used to raise pigs on the farm – which is how this all connects to the gospel text today. For awhile, the symbol of the Erlandson farm was a pig grazing in front of a barn. I have a green farmer's cap with a white front showing this emblem on the front, which for years I wore proudly – even though I knew nothing about raising pigs! My cousin Tim did, and soon got out of the pork industry – the price of pork fell too low to make a profit, so he sold the last of his pigs sometime when we were in our early 20s. No more swine for Tim! It all became about the wheat, or the soybeans, or the sunflowers, and renting the land of all the farmers who retired and spent their golden years in Mesa, Arizona!

The gospel tells a story about a man from the country of the Gerasenes, who suffered from a severe affliction, which ancient peoples called being possessed by demons or evil spirits. They were afraid of him, and ostracized him from the community in the tombs outside of the city where he once lived. Whenever the demons possessed him (when he had a seizure) he was bound and chained up under guard, but he broke his chains and ran out into the wilderness. This is when Jesus appeared, having crossed over on a boat from Capernaum in Galilee, directly to Gerasa, and when he stepped onto the land the possessed man fell down before Jesus, yelling in a loud voice not to torment him. Jesus asked his name, and the man said “Legion” – which we know as a legion of Roman soldiers, about 6000 men – could it have been 6000 demon spirits possessing him? Well, you know the story: Jesus commanded the demons to leave the man at once, so they entered a herd of swine feeding on the hillside. Immediately all the pigs raced down the hillside into the lake and they all drowned, much to the dismay of the swineherds, who ran off to tell everybody what had happened.

The man was now free from his tormenting spirits, and sat calmly talking to Jesus. He wanted to follow Jesus as a disciple, but Jesus told him to stay there in the city and tell others what God had done for him, which he did. For it had been a miraculous transformation of his life, giving him the chance to start over again. But then the people who had seen all this happen to the man and the

herd of pigs, were very afraid. They had never seen anything like this. And the sight of a whole herd of pigs rush to their deaths was very disturbing to them. It had also been a very big financial loss to the owners, who would not have been Jews, but Gentiles of this region. They begged Jesus to leave. So after he had given the man who had been possessed the mission of telling his friends and neighbors what Jesus had done, Jesus got back into the boat and crossed over again to the other side.

We get the miracle story about Jesus here, and the transformative new life now possible for the man who was once possessed. It's a great story about Jesus' power. But what other meanings could this story have had for Luke, Matthew and Mark's audience when they wrote their gospels, 40 or 50 years after Jesus' resurrection? I am always interested in the story behind the story, and the historical context understood by the original hearers of the gospel, as a student of history. And I would like to let you in on a "secret" behind the story of the pigs.

Biblical scholars have researched the background to the story, and the region of the Gerasenes (also called Gerasa), which the original hearers of the story would have known. It would be like telling a story of the suffering of a town in Europe under the Nazis, to people who had survived and lived there, after World War II. So, there was a horrible event which happened in this town where Jesus met the man possessed by demons, committed by a Roman legion during the Jewish revolt in the 60s, before Jerusalem's fall. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman general Vespasian sent soldiers to retake Gerasa, where there were many Jewish rebels. The Romans killed 1000 young men, imprisoned their families, burned the city, and attacked many villages in the region. Many of those buried in Gerasa had been killed by Roman legions (is this why Luke talks about ruins outside of the town, where the man possessed by demons lived?).

So here's the interesting thing. This Roman legion that killed so many Jews was called Legio 10th Fetenis, and the emblem on its banner, coins, and even bricks they made was: a pig. They embodied Roman disdain for the values of their Jewish subjects, who considered pigs "unclean". This legion participated in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and took the lead in reconquering Palestine. Many Roman veterans lived here in this region on lands given to them in payment for their service in the army. So could the hearers of Luke's gospel, having just experienced the horrors of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the people of towns like Gerasa, have felt some satisfaction in hearing that "the demons entered the swine grazing on the hill and rushed into the lake to drown" (like the chariots of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea)? I'm betting that they "got" the joke and appreciated the irony!

So the story of Jesus's miraculous exorcism of demons from the possessed man in Gerasa is not only a miracle story of one man's transformation, but also a

political message written in code. Jesus never said Romans were pigs, or that their legion was a horde of demons that were sent into a herd of swine, and died like pigs by mass suicide in a Jewish lake. But that may very well have been the second message that the hearers of the gospel “got”, unbeknownst to the Romans! The Bible is full of such stories, from the Pharaoh’s army drowning in the Red Sea when they chased Moses and the Israelites fleeing from slavery in Egypt, to the three Jews who would not worship Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, survived the fiery furnace and so forced even the Babylonian king to praise God as the only one to worship; or the Roman guards falling down in fear when the earthquake shook loose the stone covering Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning when God raised him from the dead (after the Romans had crucified Jesus, and wanted to keep him sealed in his tomb). The good news of the gospel today is that God has the power in Jesus to cast out evil spirits and the ravages of mental illness and heal human beings, and give us life – even one who was left out of his community because of fear during a time of religious persecution, political unrest and military occupation. There is also political good news, in how God has power even over the Roman legions who had come to attack and destroy the chosen people of God. Even if God doesn’t physically destroy the lives of Roman soldiers, Jesus inspires faithfulness and loyalty that even the most demented dictator or wannabe president fails to inspire.

So what does this passage mean to us today? To the human beings who have been left out, cast out, or ostracized in our own society and churches today, particularly our GLBT neighbors, the message clearly is that in Jesus’ eyes, each one of us is a child of God. Jesus has the power of God to cast out those demons that leave some human beings vulnerable and brings the “outsider” home. On this Pride Weekend in the Twin Cities and throughout America, this is good news to many people whom we love, and many whom we don’t even know. Even if this good news comes against our personal judgment or wishes, and turns the Church on its head, I have to say “it’s about time, thanks be to God!”

And then today it is Refugee, Migrant and Immigrant Sunday in the Lutheran Church. This brings another context of meaning for us in the Church today. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service was founded in 1939, to reach out with compassion to refugees and people forced from their homelands during World War II. In those years of the 1940s, the majority of refugees were European and Lutherans – from Germany and Eastern Europe. Over the years, Lutheran churches in the United States have reached out to orphan children from the Korean and Vietnam war, and in the 1970s and 1980s countless American Lutheran churches sponsored refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia – Hmong, Cambodian, and Vietnamese – as well as refugees from Ethiopia, Liberia, Somalia and other African countries torn apart by war. This is something we do as Christians as a Church, in response to the call of Jesus to all who follow him, to

give food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, clothing to the naked, in the name of Jesus. Lutheran Church of the Redeemer sponsored several Hmong families from Laos in the 1980s. Lutherans sponsored my wife Kim's family in 1980, and founded a ministry for Southeast Asians at Christ on Capitol Hill. This work is what drew me to Lutheran ministry, and I was there to welcome and baptize many immigrant and refugees to Minnesota. It is a sign of our faithfulness that we have responded to such a call.

So now we have a national crisis of faith and these values of hospitality, welcome, and compassion for strangers, refugees, immigrants and migrants in the United States of America. I don't know where the hatred and anger came from, although we all know it was under the surface even when we acted as Christians with compassion for immigrants and refugees. But it seemed that our good example would keep racism and hatred of foreigners under wraps – hoping that our white neighbors would be too ashamed to let their inner prejudices turn into blatant action. But this all changed in 2016, with the elections and the first Muslim ban.

Today we are three years into a government that refuses to protect migrant workers, immigrants and refugees except on the local level. Lutheran congregations have been forced to create sanctuary spaces where we give shelter to undocumented migrants INSIDE our churches, a step of faith of which I am so proud of our church having taken. But we know we cannot protect every family in this way. For now our president and ICE threaten mass arrests and deportations of immigrant families who have not been granted asylum and have deportation orders. This is causing great fear and sending whole families into hiding. This weekend we heard our president threaten to send ICE into major cities to begin arrests of thousands of families – maybe even millions if they had the capacity, which they don't. He called for this to begin TODAY ON SUNDAY, our Lord's Day! How offensive! Hearing the protests from across the nation, he postponed this day of infamy for the weekend of THE FOURTH OF JULY, the day we celebrate our nation's independence, freedom and justice for all. How ironic.

So today, as the date of arrests is in "limbo", we see how families seeking asylum have been detained, parents separated from their infant children, and children held in substandard conditions in detention centers in places like El Paso, without adequate food, bedding, clean clothes, baths or even toothbrushes, because our U.S. government lacks the capacity, the funds, the compassion or moral fiber to care for children – from families seeking asylum or protection from danger.

This is our new American context, and I don't like it a bit. Today we can celebrate our Lutheran history of welcoming immigrants and refugees, and the institutions we have created to care for new neighbors in crisis. We can dedicate our Healing Garden, tended by our Hmong neighbors who once came as immigrants but now are citizens who contribute so much to our community. It is a

joy to do that! But we also know that we have a lot of soul-searching to do in our nation, and a lot of work to do to change the message of hate and exclusion which reigns today into one of compassionate welcome for new neighbors, regardless of race, religion, or country of origin. That message has not been decided upon yet, and we need to make it so. We Lutherans will not stand by quietly, obey unjust policies and laws, which separate us from our neighbors, detain children and separate families in the name of the law. We protest in the name of Christ, and demand compassion in the name of God!

I wish that I could quietly retire at the age of 65, learn to fish and relax at the family lake cabin in a world that is just, in a land where people love their neighbor. But I can't. There is too much at stake, too much to do, to return justice to our land, and make "love the fulfillment of the law" as the Apostle Paul proclaims in the book of Romans. We could "retire" as a church, close our doors and let a new generation or some other congregation take over this ministry here, and wash our hands of the whole deal. But in the name of Jesus, we cannot. If we have an ounce of faith and a breath left in our bodies, we must stand up as a Church like Martin Luther and our Lord Jesus to say "Here I stand, I can do no other, for the rights of my neighbors to live in freedom, and for migrants, immigrants and refugees from many lands to come to this land for a new life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, God help us!

Thanks be to God for the blessings of life that we have received in this land, even when it has been at the expense of those who first lived here. Still, we are grateful, and seek to be faithful to God, and share it with others. May God give us the strength of faith to follow Jesus' example of mercy, and courageous witness of compassion for others. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.