

“Healing Pigs” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
June 20, 2010 – Proper 7C

I want to look at the gospel this morning and I want to consider it in terms of the healing that happens in this story. Restoration would be another word we could use. Or wholeness, even shalom which means the wholeness that is peace. This is an amazing story really, because it hits on those themes on so many different levels.

First there is the obvious healing of the individual and that’s probably the way most of us hear this story, at first anyway. It’s a story about a man who had been tortured by demons for years and years, to the point that they controlled his physical and his mental presence. This man was not free; he was burdened and occupied by something other than his true self as the demons had power over his mind and over his body and they probably even affected his soul. So when Jesus approached this man’s town, when he first “stepped out of the boat onto the land,” the gospel says, the man met him immediately and in a rather confused way asked to be set free from this pain. In an interesting exchange the man spoke and then the demons did too and then Jesus rather calmly invited the demons to leave. In a gentle moment, Jesus released the demons and the man all at the same time and the demons went into a herd of swine who then promptly threw themselves over the cliff. And the man returned to his town “in his right mind” the gospel says. This is the story about a man’s healing.

But there’s more here too. Don’t you wonder about the pigs? That part of this story has always bothered me. Why free one creature while tormenting another? Why was it seen as good news that a whole herd of God’s creatures, swiney as they might have been were drowned as an integral part of a story about how God heals? Well, this piece of the story, the “pig piece” is Luke sneaking in another message, reminding the listeners and readers of the many dimensions of healing that Jesus was about and using a little humor to do that. Pigs were a staple of the Roman economy and the Roman army so they were the food of the occupiers of the territory not the food of the people of Gerasene. The pigs, in the form of dried pork, were eaten by Roman soldiers whose “legions” occupied the land. So Luke’s having Jesus send the pigs over the cliff wasn’t about the pigs at all, it was a commentary regarding the undesirable occupation of one people over another. So this isn’t just a story about the healing of a man, it’s a story that points to the freeing of a people.

But even that’s not all that’s going on here. Notice at the end of the story that the man who was healed is told by Jesus to stay in his home town to not continue on with the disciples as they move to another city. “The man from whom the demons had gone,” Luke said “begged that he might be with Jesus; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’” And that’s because this story is not only about the healing of a man and the freeing of a people, it’s also about the local community and the healing that God wanted for them. It’s not too much of an exaggeration to say that the town needed this man for the sake of their own salvation, part of they needed in order to be whole. Sara Miles in her book *Jesus Freak* explains that “In the Levitical system, order came by expelling the disordered one. [All kinds of disordered ones. And] The community was kept not just safe but righteous by exiling those people whose disease defined them as unclean. An unclean man became socially

dead to the community, and therefore had to be separated from everyone else, because his touch – like the touch of a corpse – would contaminate the pure.” And that’s a perfect description of what was going on with the locals in Gerasene. The man with the demons had been made dead to this community because his “disease” and therefore he was a threat to them. Now granted demons are scary things and should be treated with care, but the man was not a demon he was a man. And he had been banished, bound in chains and shackles and exiled to live as the story said, “among the tombs.” And that banishment of the “other” was part of how the community had maintained its own sense of order, in a holy sense too. But then in this story the “other” returned to them and that may have been the biggest challenge of all. Notice that the point at which the people are afraid is the point at which this man stands in front of them “clothed and in his right mind.” They didn’t know what to do. They were afraid and part of what scared them was that this “one of them” who was now restored to them, and was apparently worth as much as them, and as loved by God as them. And according to Jesus coming to terms with the return of the “other” and the disorder that comes in such moments is part of what healing looks like. Healing actually shakes things up and that shake up is part of what shalom demands.

And so this story tells us so much. So much about ourselves and the peoples and our God. Healing is about you and me and us and them and God cares about all of those different levels of what it takes to be whole and free and at peace. And so our attention needs to be paid to all of those dimensions too. We are called to know our own demons to the extent that Jesus can occasionally have a word with them. We are called to be aware of the ways in which entire peoples remain occupied, controlled by others in ways that limit not only their freedom but also the peace of the world. We are called to open our eyes “to the others” who bound by chains and shackles long to be restored as “us”.

May we find the humility to know our need and the strength to do the work that is the healing of Christ.

Amen.