

Geresenes, pigs and demons.

It would make a good TV movie title wouldn't it?

This story that we just heard read this morning, was an important one in the early church. Many biblical scholars think it may have been the first attempt – prior to John, to offer a theological truth through story. In other words, this story was created to show us who Jesus was. And to the early followers of Jesus, showing who Jesus was – was as important as showing what Jesus did.

In this story, we meet a man who is filled with demons. We are not told how this man was infested by the demons, but they are making his life miserable. The people of the town have chained him, stripped him, driven him outside their town, and forced him to live in a tomb.

Jesus frees the man from his fetters, and asks the demons to depart. They don't want to be completely cast out, and ask to enter a herd of swine, but the swine instead kill the demons by hurling themselves off the cliff.

Word spreads about what's happened, and the people of the town come to see. They recognize the man who now sits clothed and calm among them, and they are afraid.

They aren't upset about the death of their herds, mind you—they are afraid because the man isn't being who he is supposed to be. He's not acting correctly.

In fact: they were far more comfortable with the man possessed by demons than the same man made whole by Jesus.

Now why would that be?

Because this isn't a simple story of possession. It's a parable.

Leviticus 16 describes a clever little ritual. On the Day of Atonement, a priest lays his hands on an "escaping" goat, placing all the sins of the Jewish people from the previous year onto the animal, called the

Scapegoat. Then the goat is beaten with reeds and thorns and driven away from civilization, and is forced out into the desert.

Then the people go home relieved and happy. Their sins are GONE! They've cleverly been transferred onto the scapegoat. They are relieved of the responsibility for sins they have committed, or thought, or taught. It's far easier to scapegoat an animal, or later-- another person or another race or another group for the evil that happens within a society, than it is to take responsibility for it.

I imagine this is just how Christians felt after burning a "witch" at the stake—self—righteous! Especially when what they really wanted was the woman's property. I imagine that's how white Americans felt after lynching black men for daring to say they were fully human and desired freedom, and I imagine that's how some-- even now-- feel justified and righteous at the caged children of immigrants because their parents were seeking safety from war, murder and poverty.

Whenever those we perceive as a "sinner", or "bad" person, or any person who makes us uncomfortable-- is made to take the blame for our sins of hard-heartedness, greed when shame—when we can scapegoat another-- our ego is delighted and feels relieved and safer. This exclusion and blame for the "other" *kind* of works, but only for a while.

It can't work entirely, because scapegoating doesn't really eliminate evil. It doesn't even relieve our experienced discomfort. It just takes what we are feeling, and symbolically places it on another, so we can try and ignore it.

The story of the Gerasenes this morning describes the story of humanity's tendency to scapegoat.

Perhaps the townspeople had chosen this man, this victim, to represent all their sins, their demons. They infested the man with them. Then they drove him out of town. They demons devoured him inside, but left his body, and so he lived in the tombs, with the dead.

It's difficult to believe that the townspeople really couldn't restrain the man with ANYTHING, isn't it? But that was part of the ritual. *"His demons are so*

bad that nothing restrains him. He's crazy, we're not, because see? It happens every time." Of course it does. The villagers ensure that it does. Some one is bad—the man—infested by their demons, and someone is good—the poor villagers.

Everyone knows exactly what's going to happen, and they all play the roles which ensure it DOES happen again.

In fact—like in any ritualistic or theatrical production everyone gets into the role more each time and relishes the continuity.

This doesn't mean the villagers don't really suffer. They NEED to feel like they are persecuted and to suffer for the ritual to be worthwhile. In fact, they are so self-righteously suffering that they feel deprived when Jesus ends the cycle of misery and violence. They want Jesus to leave, and they want their scapegoat back.

"Jesus became the willing scapegoat to reveal the universal lie of scapegoating. John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the *sin* [not sins] of the world" (John 1:29). It seems "the sin of the world" is ignorant hatred, fear, and legitimated violence. In worshiping Jesus as the scapegoat, Christians should have learned to stop scapegoating. We too could be utterly wrong about choosing victims, just as high priest and king, Jerusalem and Rome—the highest levels of authority—were utterly wrong about Jesus." Rohr

The miracle that happened at Gerasa reversed the scheme of violence that has become fundamental to the townspeople. When Jesus arrived, the violent majority didn't rule. And the Geresenes were terrified. They ask Jesus to leave.

By the way-- the word Gerasenes literally means "*people of the city that is against Galilee.*"

This story is about the power of Jesus. The power of Jesus – the power of love—is absolute. Demons can not exist in its presence. People regain their sanity. Humankind is freed. That is why it is so dangerous.

This story, which from its origin was looked at as a parable, was given a critical place in all three synoptic Gospels as a warning. Jesus was already being seen as the lamb that takes away the sin of the world.

And here's what the story tells us: we don't need to scapegoat anymore. Jesus was the willing victim to take on all sin, to show us we no longer needed to sacrifice others for our sins.

Notice that in this story, Jesus isn't there to judge the townspeople, but he can and does destroy the demons that plague them. Jesus heals.

But some don't want healing. They prefer their hatreds. They reject the love of Christ..

And Jesus doesn't argue with them. He goes. But he leaves something behind: he leaves them hope.

Jesus comes to free us, destroy the demons in our lives, re-clothe us with love, and bring us back to our right minds.

And then he sends us out—to the very people who are far more comfortable demonizing people than seeing them whole because of the love Jesus has for them.

We are now free to stop imitating the old, violent, judgmental ways of thinking.

We are free to imitate Christ – shining with love for all. Shining with so much love, that the demons of the world become powerless in Love's presence.

And we become God's hope for the kingdom. Amen..