

Sermon for Pentecost II Year C 2025

This gospel story always makes me think about something the legendary Chef Keller tells his staff about commitment.

If you want to know what commitment is,
all you need to do is consider
the typical American breakfast of eggs and bacon:
The chicken gave something,
but the pig gave everything.
Changes the way you think about that, doesn't it?

The gospel story for this morning may seem at first glance like a simple healing—well, I shouldn't say "simple" because healing is always complicated and much more involved than to be called "simple."

Yet, we may think this is just another story of Jesus doing a wonderful kindness for one particularly tormented individual.

So is the message of this story ,
"bring what kindness you can to anyone who is tormented"?

Not a bad message. As they say, "that'll preach" and yet . . .

Underneath this "simple" kindness,
Jesus is actually doing a whole lot more.

Luke, in his telling of this story, has very carefully chosen to use a few, very particular words, that to his audience then would have immediately revealed the "more" beneath the healing story.

The trouble for us is that out of that time and context,

Luke's very particular words
tend to go right over our heads without some insider information.

It's actually just a few words or phrase choices
that seem to make all the difference.

When we hear "the land of the Gerasenes",
it's just some random Gentile city on the lake.

But to Luke's audience, "the land of the Gerasenes" was a city in the news for the violent invasion and occupation by an unwanted, powerful military force deployed by an authoritarian ruler.

When we hear the demon's name is "legion" in our minds we think, "oh that just means he had a lot of demons."

But what if Luke told you today that the demon's name was "battalion"? Would that hit differently?

When Luke's audience heard the particular Greek words translated for us as "hand and foot chains" they would have heard those particular words the same way we hear the word "zipties" today.

Both turn out to be very particular types of restraints each used in their own times for the same purposes.

When we read Luke's word "seized" it doesn't invoke in us anything deeper than just a straightforward medical term.

But what happens in your gut when you hear the word "detained" in our current world's situation?

It hits differently, doesn't it?

And finally when we read in Luke that Jesus chose to send the demon hoard into a herd of pigs, we tend to attach no additional meaning to that beyond it reminding us that this was a non-kosher, Gentile city.

But everyone in Luke's audience would have caught the bright, flashing, neon, completely unsubtle double entendre that the demons were sent into a herd of pigs and the mascot of the Tenth Roman Legion, the 6000 elite combat troops occupying the city, just happened to be the wild boar. Just a coincidence?

For Luke's audience, the particular word choices in just those few places took a healing story and transformed it into a divine proclamation:

Might makes right and the oppression of our neighbors is not the way God calls us humans to order our lives . . .

not for Jews and not for Gentiles.

Weapons of war and an overwhelming force using intimidation, bullying, and violence to get and hold onto power is most definitely not God's way.

And . . . the implication from Luke's particular telling of this story goes even further than that.

It declares that these ways of bullying, intimidation and violence are nothing short of demonic.

But Jesus wasn't just healing this one man and Jesus wasn't just condemning authoritarianism and might makes right.

In Luke's telling of this story, Luke was also trying to help his audience see that Jesus was also trying to teach all people how to work through their problems in better ways.

The town had tried to solve their demonic problem by snatching it off the street, locking it up and sending it away.

Not quite literally burying it alive, but chaining it up in the tombs wasn't really too far off, was it?

They had tried to detain, restrain, and warehouse their problem—out of town, out of sight, and out of mind.

But Jesus told them that when you do that, your problems will always break loose, always come back, and always end up causing even more problems than they had before.

Jesus then goes on to show them a better way.

He walked right up to the problem, face to face, and addressed it head on.

It wasn't an easier way but it was a kinder, more compassionate, and frankly more effective way of dealing with their community problems. Shunning, deporting, ghettoizing, warehousing in prisons, chaining up, and de-humanizing others is not God's way and on top of all that, it doesn't solve your problems.

It only makes them worse.

It says that snatching people off the street, chaining them up, and throwing people away, for any reason, is frankly, demonic.

The Jesus way, God's way, is to meet people right where they are. See them honestly in all the bare, messy complexity of their human condition and to see them still as children of God.

And then do everything in our power to give our neighbors what they need to live with dignity.

Now, we should never throw around words like “demonic” easily or casually but there are times these days when I can’t find a better word for what is going on around us.

So it is especially important for us to hear this gospel story and be reminded that those ways are not God’s ways and that the best way to deal with both challenging people and our shared community challenges is the Jesus way . . .

directly, head, on, with honesty, selflessness, kindness, compassion, grace, generosity, love and . . . one more important dimension—commitment.

Sure the chicken kind of commitment is good, but the Jesus way is the bacon kind of commitment . . . giving our all.

The world’s problems back in Luke’s day were not solved by the authoritarian rule of “might makes right” nor by sending away challenging people or burying community challenges.

Those problems would only be solved, Jesus showed them, by embracing the Jesus way of kindness and pursuing justice and making peace . . . the Jesus way is not easy but it is still the best way to address the challenges of the world.

My prayer is that the world might one day soon embrace the Jesus way to solve its problems . . . rather than choosing again and again to tell Jesus and his way to get back in his boat and go away.

Instead let us return to our homes and declare how much God has done for us.