

## “Undoing the Chains”

Sermon by Vicar Kevin Tracey

January 26, 2020, Reconciling in Christ Sunday

Psalm 89:1-4 | Mark 5:1-20

*Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and Our Lord Jesus, the Christ. Amen.*

I read a lot about pigs this week. If you'd believe it, the comment section on online preaching commentaries can get to be a rather heated place. And this week, there was a rousing discussion about whether or not pigs can swim and whether or not the pigs in our story today would have actually drowned.

After my own research, I feel comfortable stating confidently that yes, pigs can swim.

In our Gospel today, we encounter one of the more peculiar stories. It's one of the miracles of Jesus that we don't read that often, probably because it deals with the mass death of a bunch of animals, and demonic possession, subjects that tend to make us squirm a little bit.

When I first flipped to the lectionary text for the week, with the knowledge that we'd be celebrating Reconciling in Christ Sunday today... I was a bit apprehensive. I contemplated switching to the text Reconciling Works recommends from Luke, when Jesus reads from Isaiah in the temple and proclaims that he has come to liberate the oppressed. Certainly, a story that is rich with connections to what it means to be an affirming and welcoming community.

If you don't know, Reconciling Works is a Lutheran organization that has, since 1974, advocated for the full welcome, inclusion, and equity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual Lutherans in all aspects of the life of the whole Church, individual congregations, and various communities.

And today, we celebrate that Christ Lutheran Church has been a Reconciling in Christ congregation since 1987, which means that for over thirty we have explicitly stated in our public welcome that queer people are welcome here at this church.

CLC is one of about 900 faith communities in the ELCA that publicly states this welcome.

Which is awesome—this is truly something to celebrate. But for a bit of perspective, the ELCA has about 10,000 faith communities. We still have some work to do.

The more I sat with our Gospel text for today, the more I realized that this story, with all of its curiosities and rough edges and messy connection was really the story we were being called to hear today.

This day, as we celebrate what it means to us and our community for this church to continue to proclaim that's God's love is truly for all, we hear the story of a man, rejected. Of the Gerasene demoniac.

As we enter into our Gospel story today, Jesus has just stepped out of a boat. In the verses before, Jesus, woken up by his panicking disciples, calms the storm raging around them with only his words and reprimands them for their lack of faith.

As he steps onto the shore, immediately, Jesus is confronted by this man.

This man, ritually unclean because of his contact with corpses...

This man, possessed by a multitude of demons...

This man, kept at a distance—chained and shackled...

I'm always fascinated with how we find ourselves in scripture—where we locate ourselves and who we identify with. I think we often want to be the person who calmly watches as Jesus performs his miracles. Or even better, we want to be the person that totally gets what's going on—that person that reacts in precisely the right way.

You know, the person that doesn't end up on the receiving end of any of Jesus's sass...

In our story today, I find myself most fully in the Gerasene demoniac. And if I'm being totally honest... I'm sure that's where most of my queer siblings would find themselves too.

The man chained and shackled, kept at a distance.

I'm gay. Ten years ago, those are words I'd never thought I'd say... let alone in front of other people. And especially not in a pulpit. And most definitely not while wearing a collar and in seminary.

But here I am. In a pulpit. Definitely in seminary, definitely wearing a collar, and definitely gay.

I've been out now for over five years. And I've spent a lot of time casting off those chains and shackles. I've spent a lot of time pushing back against the ways that absolute strangers, and even people I love, have tried to keep me in the closet... in the tombs, you might even say.

And it is so liberating and holy to live authentically—to cast off those chains and be who God has made you to be. But the memories of those constraints don't go away easily. Sometimes, it catches you off guard. And you can almost still feel the weight of the chains digging into your memories.

I identify with the Gerasene Demoniac because I know what it means to be shackled and chained up by the world around you. To be perceived as something so different—so wrong that you needed to be kept from society's sight. From the Church's sight.

And I know what it's like to be possessed by the demons of homophobia and marginalization. To be fearful to hold my partner's hand in public or to have to ignore slurs and taunts thrown at me by complete strangers.

And this doesn't take into account all the intersectional categories of race and class and how they influence how I walk through the world.

These demons persist. These demons of violence and oppression. The demons that punish anyone that dares to be just a little bit different... persist.

They continue to rear their ugly heads in our world, in our community—in our Church. These demons persist. They show up again and again, demanding space and attention, and creating chaos and cruelty.

And then, in the midst of it, is Jesus...

In the howling and loneliness and the shackles and chains... is Jesus.

Jesus shows up and casts out these demons. Casts out the hate and the violence. Jesus unbinds the shackles and throws off the chains.

And when it's over...

When the chains lay useless at the floor and the demons have been destroyed...

Christ demands that this story—this tale of liberation and grace—be proclaimed to everyone.

And the people are amazed.

That's the power of this story. It ends in amazement. It ends in liberation. In freedom. In joy. The Gerasene man, freed from the bonds that have held him captive for so long, goes to his community and preaches to them—proclaims the Good News to the very people that locked him away.

Growing up, I didn't really know any gay people. And it wasn't until college that I even met an openly gay pastor. And when I got to seminary, I knew I wanted to spend some time learning from openly LGBTQ clergy.

Last weekend, I went back to Philly to celebrate the retirement of one of my mentors, Rodger. Rodger had been the rector of Saint Luke and the Epiphany for almost 40 years. And I had the privilege of spending two years learning from him.

Rodger has been openly gay for his entire career, having come out in seminary. And Rodger has taught me much more than I can ever describe about what it means to be a pastor and what it means to be gay in the church.

And at his retirement party, most of his previous seminarians, many of whom are queer, were able to come. And as I'm getting ready to leave, Rodger declares to me and a few other previous seminarians... "Stop, You have to dance with me!"

And, of course we said yes with no hesitation—we made it to the dance floor as the song changed, and from the speakers we hear:

*"It's raining men, alleluia, it's raining men."*

These are the moments that remind me of the continual movement of the Spirit. Of the resilience of God's people and of the promise that one day, God's Kingdom will come again to unite all of God's creation. To break every chain and cast out every demon.

And you can bet there's going to be dancing.

This is what we acknowledge when we celebrate Reconciling in Christ Sunday—that the demons and chains of marginalization and oppression have no weight here. That this community rejoices in and celebrates all people. That this church stands behind the notion that all really does mean all.

And that one day, we will be able to rejoice in a world that celebrates the beloved-ness of all people.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.