

Highfield Rd Uniting Church

The Power of Grace

Luke 8:26 - 39



Each time this passage from Luke comes around in the Lectionary, I groan a little and ask, “Why can’t they take the pigs out of the story?” A wonderful story of the grace of God restoring a man to health, and restoring his identity, goes over the cliff with the pigs! Cries of ‘animal cruelty’, and ‘economic losses’, and ‘Jewish racism that doesn’t care about the livelihood of those swineherd’, dominate people’s responses to this story in our

modern culture. And it’s hard to recover from that, particularly when the story features demon possession! However, I have come to see that trying to excise the pigs from this story doesn’t leave us with the strong message that the Gospel writers wanted. Matthew and Mark contain this story as well, and it was obviously an important story, even if it prompted some controversy between the Jewish and Gentile members of the Early Church. That is a call to look deeper. And yes, there is much about this story, metaphorically and practically, that helps it live, even in our modern culture.

The grace of God does not just bring healing within our lives, it brings change, dramatic change that looks scary and threatening, particularly if you have become comfortable or accepting of the situation you are in.

The situation of the man who greets Jesus as he gets out of the boat is vividly described; possessed by something with many voices, driven out of normal society to live in the tombs, naked and sometimes a threat to himself or the people of the city, stripped of identity and sense of self. And yet, the first thing he says to Jesus is, “What do you want with me. Don’t torment me.”

The people of the city see this man who they were trying to deal with, and thought they had contained, recovered and sane and yet their response is not joy or amazement, it’s fear, and they ask Jesus to go away.

The power of grace is to give us what we need and not necessarily what we want.

Imagine you are one of those swineherds on the hillside that day. You are responsible for the safety and wellbeing of the herd that is the collective property of the town - much like the shepherds of Jewish villages looking after the flock of the town. Suddenly, the whole herd takes fright and rushes over the edge to drown in the lake. You look around and there is a stranger on the beach talking to that crazy man who lives naked amongst the tombs. What do you do? That herd was your responsibility; what are you going to tell the townsfolk? “Some strange Jewish man has frightened off the pigs, he’s in league with that mad man in the tombs”. Now imagine you are one of the townsfolk. You know how much trouble that man in the tombs is, and now it looks like he has cost you your pigs, so you come with fear and trembling to see what is going on. And what do you find? The man from the tombs, who strangely isn’t given his name back by the storytellers, is sitting on the ground, neat and tidy and sane! Whoever this strange Jewish man is, he is

powerful enough to get rid of demons and get rid of our pigs. We could control the man in the tombs, how do we control this man? Send him away! All the possibilities of healing and new life are not enough to conquer their fear of change. Or, without the personal testimony of that man, who Jesus tells to stay there for that very reason, those Gerasene towns folk can only see their economic loss and fear, and not see the power of grace that freed that man from such a dreadful situation. Without the pigs, this story does not contain the necessary drama of the conflict between grace and change.

I am not a qualified counsellor or psychologist and won't comment on what this man went through, except to say that I marvel that Luke's description of the man when the townsfolk arrive is "they found him in his right mind"! - not healed, or restored, or free of his demons. It is as if Luke knew that, millennia later, when we know so much about mental illness, this story will still have power. In the grip of whatever this man was going through, he could not see the healing he needed, only punishment or further torment. It is as if he was content with his situation, that he considered he had himself under control, just like the townsfolk. But Jesus saw more and delivered the healing he needed, not what he thought he wanted.

Although there is something about this whole episode that seems a little strange - why did Jesus cross the lake, just to get back in the boat and cross back again, at least the journey to Tyre and Sidon in another Gentile story comes with the reason of escaping the pressure of the crowds - it gives us a story about mission. We are called to leave our safe and comfortable places and encounter scary people and opposition in the name of our God of grace. We are called to go to where the need is, even if that means dealing with people who are not just foreign but in the grip of evil that we just cannot imagine. We cannot turn our back on those who hear voices, who self-harm, who are subject to fits of violence, or who seem to be so far gone in mental illness that they have no identity. We are not nice people dispensing charity, we carry the power of grace into places where hope is thin or even non-existent. And the power of grace brings change, dramatic change. While it's a bit of a stretch, if we went into a situation of someone in the grip of drugs and released that person from addiction, destroying their drugs, would people complain about the economic loss to the drug dealers?

And the other lesson about mission is one that the church is only relearning now. When Jesus told the healed man to go back and tell the people about all that God had done for him, he set a standard - the best missionary is a local person who personally knows the grace of God.

The pigs might be a distraction in this story, but they set up the metaphor for the inertia of comfort that works against the change that comes with the grace of God. Life cannot just go back to being the same when you are encountered by the grace of God. Healing, hope, new life, new perspectives, all flow from being gripped by God.

Over the years I have learnt from experience that it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between excitement and fear. Somehow those two emotions sit side by side in our minds. And fear of losing what you feel comfortable with can stop you from entering the excitement of something new.

The powerful, but not dominant, grace of God came to the people of the Gerasenes that day; releasing a man trapped in evil and bringing the possibility of new life and new faith to whole new part of the world. And that powerful, and yet not dominant, power of grace is still available in the name of Jesus and our willingness to carry that grace beyond our comfort zones. Amen