

Misplaced Empathy(?)

I don't know about you, but I listen to the Gospel lesson appointed for today, ***and I can't help but feel sorry for the guy who owned the pigs.*** It's obviously good that the demon-possessed guy had been made well, but his being made well came at the expense of somebody else. ***Some poor pig farmer had to lose his livelihood.*** I don't know... it just doesn't seem right. This guy gets punished so that somebody else can be made well. Why would Jesus do that? Why would He allow this poor guy (and his family, presumably, as well as his hired hands) to suffer such great loss?

Well... the ***prevailing assumption*** is because those were Gentile pig farmers [aka Non-Jewish unbelievers]. No Jew would ever mess with pigs, right? And since they must have been Gentiles, then they ***obviously*** had it coming. ***Who cares if Gentiles suffer, right?*** That's why Jesus let the pig herd get destroyed. Who cares if a Gentile farmer and his family are ruined? Not Jesus!

Understand: This isn't a random or crazy hypothesis or something I'm just saying for dramatic effect. This belief has been around a long time. To be sure: **it's NOT correct**, but I do understand why so many have believed this for so long. Remember: The Gerasene countryside was on the ***other side*** of the Sea of Galilee. In terms of Jewish frame-of-thought, it was the "other side of the tracks," Gentile territory. Naturally, then, it was considered "unclean," a land full of sin and sinful degenerates; a land absent the goodness of God; "God-forsaken" you might even say. Think about it. ***Of course*** the first person Jesus encountered after arriving on the shores of the Gerasenes is a demon-possessed man who made his home in a cemetery. ***Duh!*** It's a God-forsaken place, so naturally the welcoming party is going to be demon-possessed and making his home among the dead. Still... doesn't it seem kind of cruel that some poor Gentile pig farmer lost his livelihood?

Well... whoever said that this poor pig farmer or any of his farmhands were ***pagan Gentiles?*** Whoever said that any of those Gerasene city-folk who came out to see what had happened were ***pagan Gentiles?*** **Not Scripture!** We make that assumption ***simply/only because of the pigs.*** After all, no Jew would ***ever*** mess with pigs! Therefore, we **must** be dealing with pagan Gentiles.

Folks: The land of the Gerasenes was actually part of the ***original Promised Land, on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee***, right on the boundary line between the tribes of Manasseh and Gad. This place was originally settled by good, God-fearing children of Abraham. ***The problem?*** As time went by, they had forsaken their Lord and His Word for them. The land truly became God-forsaken, but it wasn't God who forsook His people, but His people who forsook Him. The Israelites didn't move out of the Gerasenes; the Promised Land. The Gerasenes wasn't overtaken by a new and different pagan people. Nope. The

Israelites living in the Gerasenes simply wandered away from the faith of their fathers. They gradually but absolutely began to forsake God.

By the time Jesus was making the rounds, the land of the Gerasenes had become kind of a mixture of the Old Wild West and Las Vegas. As far as the people of the Gerasenes were concerned, what happened in the Gerasenes was ***nobody else's business... including God's***. What happened in the Gerasenes stayed in the Gerasenes. And if respectable, hard-working, Yahweh-loving descendants of Abraham (that's how they saw themselves) chose to make a living by raising pigs, so be it. In the land of the Gerasenes they were free to do what they wanted to do. ***Who are you to judge them or their faith?! A man's gotta make a living. If raising pigs makes me happy and makes me money, then it can't be wrong. God knows my heart. Besides, there are certainly way worse sinners than me.***

Hmm... that kind of changes things, doesn't it? These weren't innocent Gentile pig farmers who happened to be herding their pigs in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nope. These were Jewish people who had utterly forsaken the Word of their God and Lord. They weren't poor ignorant people who had never been taught about God's prohibition on pork. ***They absolutely knew what God had said, but they didn't care.*** Making money was more important. Being comfortable was more important. Doing what they wanted to do, and when they wanted to do it—being happy and following their heart... rather than following God—was more important. These were men who dared to call themselves faithful children of Abraham while ***openly and unapologetically*** living lives in direct opposition to God.

Sinful behaviors have sinful consequences. Your sin always catches up to you. What happens in the dark is always eventually brought to light. The father disciplines his child because he loves them, right? ***Do you think this disciplinary measure got the attention of the wayward children living in the Gerasenes?*** It's sad that it took drowning a herd of demon-possessed pigs to get their attention, ***but it worked.*** And we're not just talking about the farmer and his farmhands. That demonic stampede got the attention of the ***entire city of progressively-minded, free-thinking liberal Jews.*** They all came out to see what had happened. A herd of demon-possessed pigs goes over the cliff, straight to the bottom of the sea, and everyone immediately took notice. ***Wouldn't you?***

And yet... none of them ***repented***, did they? It got their attention, but it didn't change them. When confronted with their sin and the fact that the One they were sinning against was standing before them, ***rather than repent, they drive Jesus away out of great fear and even greater impenitence.*** They didn't turn from their sins. They didn't even turn away from Jesus. Rather, they turned Jesus away from them. They were more intent on trying to save/preserve their

plans/desires. They had a good thing going, and they didn't want to lose it. ***They were very comfortable in the status quo of their sinful lives, and change wasn't going to be an option.*** Rather than draw near in repentance to the One who would forgive them and cleanse them of their rebellious sin, they instead chose to drive Him away, terrified that He was only coming to strike them down and treat them worse than the demon-infested pigs. *"Get out of here!"*

You know... I'd like to think that things would be different in our case. I'd like to think that if a herd of demon-possessed pigs went barreling through the midst of our daily lives it would get our attention... and change us, ***but I don't know though.*** Just examine your own reality. You know your Lord's commands. You know what He says. No one here can plead genuine ignorance about things like not having other gods, being faithful in worship, murder/gossip, adultery/lust, slander, greed, or covetousness. We know what He says about all these things, and He's said it all very plainly and very clearly. No one can plead ignorance..., and yet how often we treat His plain and clear Word ***like a cafeteria plan, picking and choosing what we like and ignoring what we don't like.*** Let's go as plain and simple as it gets: *"Love one another just as I have loved you."* How's that working out for you? It's different in your case, right? *"Don't judge me! God knows my heart!"* ***Yeah... the Gerasene folks couldn't have said it any better. It's sad, but would it have to take a stampede of demon swine to get you to re-examine your "obedience"?***

Help me out here: *"God works all things..." why?* Answer: For the GOOD of those who love Him! I know it's not always easy to believe, but our very wise and loving God permits and allows, and even ***causes*** things to happen—***good or bad (think Lamentations)***—for the good of His people and for their salvation. In this way, then, **EVERYTHING** in life—good and bad—is understood through repentant faith as ***another teaching moment, another wake-up call, another call to repentance...*** another reminder of God's Gospel promise.

Consider this lesson. Besides that one guy having the demons cast out of him and being given the gift of new life in Christ, what other "good" did Jesus work in this encounter/miracle? ***What about the apostles?*** As I said earlier, the apostles were with Jesus when all this went down, and they were ***always*** in need of some good refining and teaching. Remember: These guys would **never** have had anything to do with the people of the Gerasenes, had they been given a choice. ***That's where all the sinners and hypocrites were!*** They only went because Jesus made them go. Do you think these guys had some learning to do?

Even a lone demon-possessed guy living in a graveyard in a sinful land full of sinful degenerates that most would consider ***worthy only of present and eternal suffering...*** even he was loved and redeemed by Jesus! Do you think these proud men still had some learning to do? Do you think that the demon-possessed pig

stampede down to Davy Jones' locker ***got their attention too? Does it get your attention today?*** It should! God was working your good in all this too! **He still is.** That stampede of pigs was for you too! We're discussing it and wrestling with it right now, aren't we? Do you need another wake-up call, another call to repentance and another reminder of God's Gospel promise? ***What does it take for God to get your attention? And then I have to ask why?*** Why does it take so much? Why does it take something drastic or terrible to knock you down and get your attention? ***Isn't His Word, His Sacraments... His very presence good enough?***

Let's bring this to an end by focusing on the Gospel promises our Lord has ***already*** made to us. Let us fix our faith on the sure and certain reality that is God's love and mercy and grace for the sinner; for you, for me, for all children of Adam. Look at this cross. ***This is God's love for you, plain as day!*** "*We preach Christ crucified.*" This is what it's all about. This is what the ***entire life*** of the child of God is all about. Look here at the love of God for you, made flesh and nailed to a bloody cross. ***Does this not get your attention?*** This is how big of deal your sin is to God! Does this not mean ***something*** to you? **God died for you.** This is how much your God and Lord loves you... and everyone else ever descended from Adam. Now look to the font. Look to the altar. "*Baptism now saves you.*" "*Take and eat/drink. This is My body/blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sin.*" Why does God do all this? ***Why? Because He loves you.*** This is all for you; for your faith, your salvation... ***for your good.*** It's that simple, and praise God that it is.

And that's where we'll call it a day, with all the focus where it needs to be—on the love of Christ for you; with all the focus on ***Christ with you***, right here and right now in His Word and Sacraments. And now may you—like your brother-in-Christ who was formerly possessed by the devil, dead in his sin, but cleansed and made alive by Christ and His Word—may you too depart in peace and joy, confident in the fact that your loving Lord is working ***all*** things for good—for your good and for the good of all those who love Him. Like your brother-in-Christ, having been made well in Christ; having been resurrected to new life in Christ, may you, too, depart ***and freely proclaim—not just with your words, but with your very life***—all that your Lord has done for you with His perfect life, death, and resurrection, and all that He still does for you in His Word and His life-giving Sacraments.

In the name of Jesus... AMEN