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Pentecost 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Your Bacon or Your Jesus?”

Text: Luke 7:36-8:3 (Galatians 3:23-4:7)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

They wanted Jesus to leave, the people in the country of the Gerasenes. *Why?* They were afraid, Luke tells us. *But why were they afraid?* Jesus had not hurt them. Jesus only helped this man who had been tormented for such a long time, so many years. Jesus only helped them by expelling all those dangerous demons that were living so close by. Jesus only protected them from this wild man who could break chains - and so also bones and lives - with his great, demonic, strength. Why in the world would they then tell Jesus to get out and go away? Did they really like bacon that much?

Yes, the pig farmer lost his herd. The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals wouldn't like this reading today very much. *Better to sacrifice one man for the sake of a herd of pigs than to sacrifice a herd of pigs for the sake of one man!* they would say. Which would be true, all things being equal; if men and pigs were equal, just different kinds of animals. But they're not. God loves His creation, yes, but He loves you even more. For you are a man, a woman, not just created but specially created. Created in God's image.

So in that love, Jesus came. Not just to the country of the Gerasenes, but in love came to earth from heaven. And He came not just for a man possessed, but in love for a mankind enslaved to sin. And He came not just for the herd of Israel living like swine in sin, but for the whole world living like swine in sin. That all be set free. Free from our bondage to sin. Free from our possession by satan. Free from the evil that seeks to do us not only temporal but also eternal harm.

And in Holy Baptism, that's exactly what happens. *Freedom.* For still today through water and the Word, our Lord comes and commands unclean spirits to come out His sons and daughters, out of you. To give you a right mind and give you His Holy Spirit. In those waters not just drowning you but raising you and giving you your life back again. Your life stolen by sin and satan. Like that man. And all that uncleanness, all that legion of sin and evil expelled from you went rushing onto Jesus on the cross, where it cast Him headlong into death and hell. For you. Yes, one man dying for the herd of us swinish sinners. That we be spared and saved.

Then that formerly-possessed man returned home. I wonder how long he had been away? Luke tells us only that it had been **“a long time.”** Were his parents still alive? What of his childhood friends? His brothers and sisters? Now, he went back home, cleansed and free. He wanted to go with Jesus, but Jesus wanted him to stay. To stay and tell his country how much Jesus had done for him. How he had been given his life back. How he had been given hope and a future.

And there, in those words, is perhaps a clue to the reason why the people of that region were so afraid of Jesus and asked Him to leave; why they would choose their bacon over Jesus: *perhaps they were afraid what it would mean for their lives.* This man’s life changed, and of course, for the better! That change was clear. But what about them who *weren’t* so possessed? What would Jesus staying mean for them and their lives? What other “pigs” of theirs would go rushing into the sea?

That’s a fear that still exists today - in many in the world . . . even in us. When you’re comfortable with your life, comfortable with your sin, comfortable with how things are, do you really want Jesus coming and upsetting everything?

Maybe you’re comfortable with the hate or anger or bitterness or resentment that has possessed your heart, and you *like* not forgiving that person who really hurt you, and you don’t want to let go and lose the upper hand, and lose the satisfaction of revenge and the power you feel over them.

Maybe you’re comfortable with the greed that has possessed your heart, loving the things you have in this world and not wanting to let go of them. You read more facebook posts each week than Bible verses. You spend more time with the computer than with your family. You’re more upset when you miss your favorite TV show than when you miss church. For church will be there next week, but I *really need to know* what happened this week on . . . ?

Or maybe you’re comfortable being comfortable! And Jesus is good and nice and all that, as long as nothing changes in my life; as long as He just takes His place alongside all the things I love, all my false gods and idols, and stays there . . . in His place.

What is it for you? Where is it that you have asked Jesus - politely, of course! - to leave that area of your life, that region of your heart, that part of your mind . . . because you’re afraid of what His staying might mean? What “pigs” of yours would have to go rushing into the sea?

But here’s the thing: *neither sin nor Jesus* will just stay so nicely in the place you want them to stay in your heart and in your life. Jesus *loves* you too much for that,

and satan *hates* you too much for that! They both want you all to themselves. Sin wants to be legion in you. Jesus wants His forgiveness in you. And you cannot serve both God and mammon (Luke 16:13).

So Jesus has come for you. That you repent of your fears, repent of your many loves and idols, and be filled with His forgiveness and life. Just as He sailed to the country of the Gerasenes for that man, so He has become incarnate and born for you. Or as St. Paul put it today: ***when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*** That we might be like that man - clean and free and right again. No longer slaves to sin, satan, and death, but children of God, heirs of heaven and eternal life, and calling out to God - not asking Him to leave - but calling out to God: ***“Abba! Father!”***

So that’s what we prayed for this morning. We prayed to our Father: *O God, You have prepared for those who love You such good things as surpass our understanding. Cast out all sins and evil desires from us, and pour into our hearts Your Holy Spirit to guide us into all blessedness* (Collect of the Day).

Guide us into all blessedness, for we don’t always know which way to go, and we often make wrong and rebellious turns. And so we need the Holy Spirit to guide us. Not just to guide us to do the right thing, but even more, guiding us here . . . to Jesus. For in Jesus is all blessedness. In Jesus is all life. In Jesus is all hope. That’s what that man found out that day, and what his fellow Gerasenes still needed to learn. *Which is it for you?* A bit of both, if you’re like me. The saint in me like that man, the sinner in me like his fellow Gerasenes. But Jesus here for all of me and all of you. To strengthen the saint, forgive the sinner, and guide you to everlasting life.

And so today, our Lord - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - will also pour into us the Body and Blood of the One who came for us. The Son of God who became a sinner with all our sin heaped upon Him, that we who are sinners be sons of God with all His righteousness, all His forgiveness, all His blessedness heaped upon us. That baptized into Christ and fed by Christ, we live as Christ and live in Christ and Christ in us.

And live that way where our Lord has put us - like that man set free. Until our Lord takes us to be with Him, you stay ***and declare how much God has done for you.***

And today, perhaps, *for us*, that “where” would be in the Public Square. For that is where, in our world today, Jesus has been asked to leave. And so on a whole host of issues, a whole host of sins, a whole host of captivity that Jesus has come to set us free from, Jesus is not welcome. Please leave Jesus. The world saying: we don’t want to give up those pigs, those sins, we love so much. And sometimes, honestly,

it can seem pretty hopeless to even try to speak against such a big, powerful, machine of modernity and post-modernity and the religious pluralism and apostasy in our world today. But you know what? That's what the Gerasenes thought too, about that man. So long had he been possessed. So powerfully had he been possessed. So hopeless his case seemed. But with just a word, Jesus changed all that. And maybe, just maybe, Jesus is going to change all that for a person through His Word that is going to come from *your* mouth.

So do not be afraid. The one in you is more powerful than the ones in the world (1 John 4:4). Yes, they are legion, but you have the One who by His Strong Word (LSB #578) sends legions fleeing, declares sins forgiven, raises the dead, and makes you His own. Like that man.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.