

## June 19, 2022 Guest Preacher: Sam Altis, Association of Faith Communities

Happy Father's Day and Juneteenth. I thought we'd celebrate with a little PB&J. Not peanut butter and jelly. A different PB&J. Pigs, Belonging and Jesus, which is what this story is about.

The story might be familiar to you, but it's still a strange one. You have a man who's experiencing something so severe that it has led him to homelessness. His community locked him up because they didn't know what to do with him.

What's actually wrong with him has been debated for years. If you're a bit more mystical and woowoo, you might be open to the idea of evil spirits. If you lean more rational and scientific, you may assume he has a severe mental illness.

What exactly was wrong with him is not really the point though. Whatever it was that this guy was experiencing, it was keeping him from belonging. It was separating him from his community, his family, and a sense of dignity. The point is what Jesus' act of healing does for him. It, like almost every act of healing, is an act of inclusion, back into community.

Then we get a little flair in the story. The evil spirits - the things that were making the man unacceptable to the community had to go somewhere, so it goes into the pigs, who proceed to run off a cliff. Pigs were unclean in Jewish culture, so it made some sense that you'd cast out something unclean into something you thought was already unclean.

In all of the quirkiness of this story, the thing that I find interesting is that in the journey to belonging, there are two moves. There's the casting out of the barriers to belonging, and the taking in of the person or thing we thought would be hard to find a place for. So, if we want to learn from this story, I think we can ask ourselves what do we cast out? What do we take in to find wholeness and belonging?

In some ways, taking in is the harder move. It's not just the people around us we need to find a place for. It's also the things within us. Moving towards belonging means reconciling with the hard parts of ourselves - severe mental illness, personality quirks, our family history.

I've found this to be true in my relationship with my dad. Father's Day is a mixed bag for me. I had a very loving but flawed father who died 8 years ago. Like all of us, he didn't really fit into the category of good or bad. He was very affectionate and loving, but also stern. He was a free thinker in many ways, but a religious fundamentalist. His death was a sort of forced reconciliation for me. What parts of him did I want to take in and carry with me, and what parts did I want to leave behind, for the pigs, so to speak.

The first year or so after his death, I was sort of in a fog around this question. But slowly, I came to a sense of clarity about what aspects of him I wanted to take in and hold on to. So much so that I got it tattooed on my arm, which was a part of the healing process. I decided I wanted to take in the things I admired about my dad – his sense of adventure, his love and his

willingness to march to his own beat. On my right arm, I have canoe, his favorite adventurous hobby and his favorite quote –

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it’s because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.” -

Thoreau

The casting out isn’t an easy move either. It has some timely challenges for us on Juneteenth and during Pride month.

The man in this story is shackled because society didn’t know what to do with him. On Juneteenth, and every day, this text asks us to cast out our modern equivalent- the practice of mass incarceration and the carnage it has caused in black and brown communities, who are subject to harsher and longer sentences, pulling families apart.

The man in this story is unclothed and unhoused. During Pride Month, and every month, we should be asking ourselves why queer young adults experience homelessness at a much higher rate, even in “accepting” places like Santa Cruz. More broadly, we should ask ourselves why homelessness in our country is increasing and what we can do to cast it out.

There are a lot of challenges in this story, but let me end with a note of thanks and encouragement. When it comes to taking folks in, I deeply appreciate what you all do. About three weeks ago, one of our shelter members was going in for a doctor’s appointment and happened to take a COVID test. To his surprise, it came back positive. That set off round after round of testing at the shelter, and, when it was all said and done, 12 out of our 14 members had COVID. Our rotating shelter model is great in many ways, but not for safely isolating sick individuals. The county used to have space in motels for them, but that program shut down just weeks earlier, which meant I was scrambling to find safe spaces for them. On top of that, this all happened while I was catching a flight to see family in the Midwest.

While sitting in the airport, I tried to book motel rooms for our sick folks until we found a better option. At check-in, two different motels turned them away. One because they were COVID positive. The other because they were homeless. During that chaos, Debbie and Katheryn had both reached out and said, “Hey, we’re going to try to make the Fireside room available for them. When do you need it by?” I had the audacity to say “How about in an hour?” Your session got together and by the end of the day, our sick folks had a place to safely isolate. In the process, two other churches also stepped up and took some of them in. I can’t tell you what a difference that made. When the local government and businesses had no place for a group of sick shelter members, you made space and took them in. You were a place of belonging.