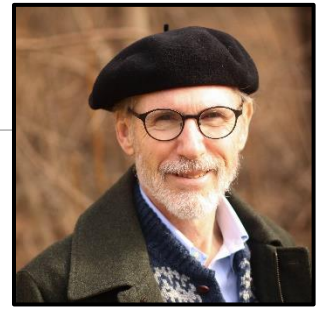


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WEEKLY REFLECTION

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DOES EAST LONGMEADOW NEED A HOG REEVE?

This week I couldn't resist reading a story in the *Boston Globe* that had the headline - "Pork and politics: Towns offer sweet twist on swine tradition." How could you not want to read a story with a headline like that!

Apparently at least two towns in New Hampshire elect at their town meeting someone to hold the office of "hog reeve," which is a very old way of describing what we'd now call a hog wrangler. The town's hog reeve is responsible for ensuring no wayward swine run loose within town boundaries, destroying crops and being a general nuisance. If only I had known hog reeves last fall when Jan called to me from the kitchen window, "There's a pig in our backyard!"

Yes. Indeed a very porky, mud-encrusted pig was in our backyard, busily rooting out my rhubarb. Apparently a neighbor more than a mile away had rescued someone's pet pig and penned it up in their barn until they could move it to an animal sanctuary in Hatfield. The pig had escaped and roamed across fields and lawns until it came to our street and, for some inexplicable reason, decided to turn into our driveway, come through our backyard gate (which I had carelessly left open), and explore our vegetable and flower gardens. I quickly closed the gate so it couldn't escape from our backyard. Then I called Hadley's animal control officer. Soon, we had four police officers in our back yard. And, with multiple squad cars pulled up in front of our house, we also had our neighbor's full attention. Next the pig's temporary owner arrived too. She had called the police station to report a missing pig; and the dispatcher kindly directed her to our address. It took five of us more than an hour to corner a very resistant hog once more into confinement, lift its temporary crate into the woman's pickup truck, and send it on its way to the animal sanctuary.

Obviously, Hadley has no hog reeve among its various town employees. It took four police officers, all of whom were inexperienced with pig behavior, to do what one knowledgeable hog wrangler might have accomplished without breaking a sweat. According to the *Globe's* article, Hadley is not the only Massachusetts town lacking a hog reeve. Most towns abandoned the office of hog reeve long ago as pig populations plummeted and computers outnumbered cornfields. Where hog reeves persist, the office is purely honorary and requires no working knowledge of swine wrangling.

This once-honorable office of town hog reeve dates back to at least the 1630s in New England. According to state archivist Ashley Miller, the office of hog reeve was imported into New England from medieval Britain where swine herders were a necessary institution. Miller goes on to quote someone named Herbert Adams who wrote in 1883 that "swine were so numerous in the days of King Edgar that he was obliged to proclaim a law to the effect that no animal of this species should be allowed to enter Church if it could possibly be hindered." Hog reeves were stationed at the church doors "to prevent profane intrusion." Church leaders having to worry about herds of swine invading their Sunday services is an aspect of medieval and Reformation Christianity that had never occurred to me.

The Puritans and Pilgrims brought this tradition of appointing hog reeves with them when they arrived and soon it was embedded in New England life. In 1719, for example, King George I required towns like to choose people to enforce swine control laws. Town records from Cornish NH show town meetings were still electing a hog reeve in the 1950s. They chose the author J.D. Salinger who wrote *Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger, apparently, was not amused by the town's enthusiastic election of him as their hog reeve.

It was a funny article and I had a few laughs sharing it with Jan. On the other hand, it has a serious side too. I thought about how often this sort of thing happens not just in towns but also in all kinds of institutions. We create offices and programs to deal with a real challenge, opportunity, or problem – like hindering swine if at all possible from invading sacred spaces. But times change. Computers replace cornfields. We buy pork chops at the supermarket and no longer butcher pigs in our backyard. Every institution, however, is loathe to stop doing something that they've become accustomed to doing. Hence, a few towns are still electing a local hog reeve when you could probably count the number of pigs in town on the fingers of one hand. We keep doing something just because we've always been doing it.

The *Globe's* story points out how old practices, habits, or programs can endure even when they no longer serve a living purpose. Sometimes they gradually die out. Sometimes we keep them going but change their name or adapt them to new purposes. Sometimes we just keep them going without thinking much about it. Churches are not immune from this temptation. We may not have an office of hog reeve in East Longmeadow; but we likely have some of its distant cousins.

Easter in the church's calendar is not a single Sunday but a season that continues through mid-May's Pentecost celebration. Easter season invites us to reflect beyond Jesus' death and resurrection to the larger biblical theme of little deaths and big resurrections of all kinds. Last Sunday and this Sunday in particular we focus on stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances to his disciples. Some of the assigned readings for Easter season are from Acts and various Pauline letters that encourage us to think about how the Christian life has a cruciform shape in which we live out in our own lives and institutions what death and resurrection look like. Hog reeving, on the other hand, reminds us of what it looks like when we refuse to let an office, program, or practice die so that something else might rise to new life in its place. At worst it drains energy and attention from other priorities. At worst, it becomes a parody of itself. Just ask J. D. Salinger how that feels.

Easter season is a good time to reflect too on what we as a congregation need to stop doing or at least dial back the energy we put into so that we can allow something new to be born in its place or alongside it. We can ask that question too about each of our own lives.

Happy Easter season!

Pastor Thomas