

Mark 5: 1-20
Healing the Mind
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The Hush of Mental Illness

*Hush! Say the families.
We'd be embarrassed for others to know.*

*Hush! Say the siblings.
We'd rather die than let anyone know.*

*Hush! Says the minister.
Someone might feel uncomfortable.*

*Hush! Say the deacons.
We only look after the physically sick.*

*Hush! Say some church members.
I don't want anyone to know about me or my relatives.*

*Hush! Say some government leaders.
There's not enough money to go around.*

*Hush! Says society.
Cause we really don't want to know.*

(Poem written by Louise G. Fisher of Raleigh, NC; found on www.nimh.org)

As I wrote in my Constant Contact, I am going out on a limb today by talking about mental illness in our sermon series on Healing. The church has gotten much better talking about physical illness but has a dismal record on talking about mental illness. Why is that?

I think there is a lack of knowledge and intentional awareness of the issues associated with mental illness. The lack of awareness is there because mental illness is a well-kept secret within most families. It is a private matter and it would be embarrassing if anyone would know. Since there still is such shame and stigma attached to mental illness, people with mental illness are afraid of how they are perceived and what people think about them. Who wants to be labeled “crazy” or be looked upon as lacking will power to get over depression or anxiety or that eating disorder?

It is no secret that the stigma attached to mental illness has resulted in inadequate insurance coverage for mental health services; has caused fear, mistrust, and violence against people living with mental illness and

their families, and might have caused family and friends to turn their backs on people with mental illness. The stigma of mental illness has led many down the road of prejudice and discrimination. (www.nami.org).

We are also dealing with lack of knowledge, of understanding mental illness. In my ministry I have come across people with all kinds of mental illnesses. And honestly, there have been a few occasions when I was afraid and felt totally helpless in the presence of a person who was unraveling in a psychotic breakdown.

Humanity's history with mental illness has come a long way. The last 50 years alone of medical research have helped greatly to increase knowledge of the diseases of the mind. We are increasingly aware of depression, anxiety and emotional dysfunction. That is the good news. But the bad news is that it is all around us. It is within us and our families. No one is exempt. No one escapes. We know of someone in our family who is having deep emotional struggles right now and that person may be any of us right now. Too many families today take turns facing enormous emotional crises.

The statistics are astounding: 26.2 % of Americans ages 18 and older – one in four adults – suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. That adds up to 57.7 million people. That number does not include people under 18 – children. 1 in 17 people, about 6 percent, suffer from serious mental illness. Mental illness is the leading cause of disability in the US. Other statistics say that close to half of the people who need treatment, don't get or seek treatment. Too many people are left to fend for themselves, and they suffer their illness alone and in silence.

Mental illness can afflict all of us. There are times in life when we become emotionally broken and overwhelmed by anxiety. There are times when our body chemistry is not doing what it is supposed to do, and we find ourselves not able to deal with life.

When someone we love is going through a very tough emotional time and maybe even contemplating suicide, most of us keep it quiet. We don't tell many folks. Maybe only close friends. Maybe only family. Maybe our minister. Maybe a counselor who is helping as we sort out the painful emotional issues. Most of us keep personal trauma rather quiet and tell only our most trusted families and friends.

Most ministers are not professionally trained to be in-depth counselors. Even though I have a degree in Psychology and Religion, when someone comes to me seeking in-depth counseling, I will always pass them on to the real professionals. My place is to be present and give emotional support along the way.

This is a long path to get to our gospel story today, but before I do, please keep the following in mind: demon possession was the first century equivalent of mental illness. Having no other explanation for some people's "crazy" behavior, it was ascribed to the works of demons within them.

Some people have called this story the best one in the New Testament. To me, it is the most unsettling story. This is what we know: Jesus and his disciples took a boat ride across Lake Galilee. When they got to the other side, they were accosted by a truly emotionally disturbed man. He didn't wear any clothing. He didn't live in a house but in the tombs or graveyard. For a time, his arms and legs had been tied up in chains and he had been under guard because he was a menace to others and to himself.

Jesus commanded the unclear spirit to come out of the man. The crazed man cried out, "What are you doing with me, Jesus?" It was the demon talking in the man. Jesus asked the demon, "What is your name?" The demon replied, "Legion" meaning that there were thousands of demons in him. Jesus commanded the demons to be released from the crazed man and into a bunch of pigs. These pigs ran down a steep bank in a frenzy and drowned in the lake.

The people who watched all of this unfold, ran into the town to tell what had happened, and when the town people got the cemetery, they found the man who was once sick and crazy, now peacefully sitting at the feet of Jesus. The Bible says, "He was clothed in his right mind."

After what had happened, the townspeople asked Jesus and the disciples to leave. As Jesus was getting into the boat, the healed man begged Jesus that he might go with him. But Jesus said, "Go back to your home and your friends and tell them how much the Lord God has done for you and how much mercy the Lord God has showered on you." So the healed man returned home, praising God throughout all the cities, saying how much God had done for him.

What does this story of a demon possessed man running around naked in the graveyard, have anything to do with us 20 centuries later? Actually a lot.

First of all, Jesus wants to heal us; anyone for that matter. Jesus wants to heal us not just from physical diseases – be it from the common cold and runny noses to pancreatic cancer to rare childhood leukemia to the complex and nasty diseases that infect and destroy our bodies.

Jesus wants to heal us from mental disease – be it the low-grade anxiety, low self-esteem and fleeting mood, to the deep suicidal thoughts, the worst of human depression and emotional paralysis we can do nothing about.

God envisions for us to have an abundant life that is free of illness and filled with wholeness for body, mind, and spirit. That is what God our parent wants for us, God's children. That is what parents want for their children, right? It is not different with God

Too often, life can be permeated with great "evil" (be it devastating mental illness or physical illness) that is almost beyond human comprehension. In that moment, we as human beings are tempted to give up. But God does not give up and Jesus does not either.

Into a situation which is overwhelmingly devastating, where a person or a society is permeated with a "legion of demons", Jesus goes there to bring his healing and peace. ***There is no situation so bad that Jesus does not bring his healing power.*** That is what this story is all about today. Jesus went to the worst possible situation of emotional suffering and healed the man. Jesus did not give up on him. Nor does Jesus give up on us either. That is what this story is about.

Healing begins with your heart and mine. In your heart and mine, God is that inner voice within that says to us, "Find help. Find healing. Find people who can help you." That is the voice of Jesus inside of us, inviting us to begin our healing process within.

As I ask the question: what helps in the in the healing process, in light of today's theme I would say that it is openness and honesty – openness to imagine God's desire for us to be well and honesty in sharing with family and friends and community and the right professionals about what is going on and, with that, seeking the wisdom of the people around us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book LIFE TOGETHER, talks about the ministry of listening. He suggests that Christians/the church have minimized this ministry of listening. Jesus Christ was the great listener and we Christians are also called to be sensitive listeners as well. Bonhoeffer wrote, "We should listen with the ears of God, that we may speak the Word of God." The word of God that is most often spoken in these situations is a divine Word of forgiveness, acceptance and love.

Healing continues when we seek the help of others. When it comes to healing mental illness, the right mental health professional is so important because God can use that person to help heal our soul.

It may be that drugs and the right pharmaceuticals are needed for our healing. In the past, the Church and society at large were often somewhat prejudiced against the use of helpful drugs for our emotions. If they help us to find the right balance and bring us back to wholeness, we should use them. And no one has the right to make us feel ashamed for taking them.

It takes time to heal, to find balance, or to find the best possible way to live with our mental illness. Time and patience is what is needed. But in our waiting let us be assured of this: Jesus wants to heal our hearts, souls, and psyches and not only our bodies.

I like the end of the healing story today. The man who was severely sick was healed and at the conclusion of the story, he was sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed in his right mind. As Jesus was getting into the boat and was about to leave, the healed wanted to go with Jesus. But Jesus said, "Go back to your home and tell others how God has healed you." And the man did. The Bible tells us that he went home to family and friends, proclaiming the good news of his inner healing to all.

There is still power today when we go back home to our family and friends and communities to tell them how we have healed from mental illness, especially when the love and power of God has been part of our healing. The telling of our story and struggle with mental illness I think has great healing power in and of itself. Silence and secrets just perpetuate suffering.

Openness, honesty, and making it real allows other to draw strength from our strength, and bring about hope and freedom to heal in the midst of community.

When that happens, we have actually uncovered the best that Christian community has to offer to the world. Amen.