

“Blessed Are the Outcasts”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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Mark 5:1-20 They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

The National Alliance of Mental Illness reports that 1 in 4 people will experience an episode of mental illness in any given year. 1 in 17 people live with severe, chronic mental illness. 1 in 10 children and youth experience a mental health disorder. Mental health conditions are the 2nd leading cause of work place absenteeism. Untreated and mistreated mental illness costs the US \$150 billion in lost productivity each year. 60% of Americans living with a mental health condition do not receive the care they need. (Blessed Are the Crazy; by Sarah Griffith Lund; Chalice Press; 2014; p. 92)

With these numbers, my guess is that we have all been affected by mental illness. Perhaps it was a relative, a friend, a co-worker, a church member, a teacher, a student or maybe even yourself. There is a great spectrum when it comes to mental illness and how people struggle with this. Even though we know the challenges that these children of God endure, we don't want to talk about it! Our society has labelled people with mental illness as being crazy, excluding them and shaming them for their sickness. I know this personally because my daughter, Bethany, has struggled with social anxiety and depression for much of her life. She has found medication and therapy to aid in her leading a relatively normal life. She is successful in her job. But, she was asked once if her medication was used as a “crutch”. Seriously! I think even the church has struggled with being open to talking about it, especially when we wonder where God is in the midst of this and how does healing occur.

Our story today in the Gospel of Mark takes us to a cemetery where a man is possessed by demons. Jesus is getting out of the boat after calming the sea from the storm. He is entering the country of the Gerasenes which is a Gentile community. This man approaches Jesus. I am sure he is quite scary looking as it says he is naked, probably dirty and has chains hanging from him. It is clear that he has suffered for a long time.

One may ask, “What are these demons that have possessed this man?” A couple of our confirmation classes have also wrestled with this question. Many Bible commentators believe that the demons that have tortured this man for a long time is what we today call mental illness. (Blessed Are the Crazy; by Sarah Griffith Lund; Chalice Press; 2014; p. 37 / Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; by Lamar Williamson, Jr.; John Knox Press; 1983; p. 105-106 / <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/10/sermon-on-suicide-caesar-and-beautiful-newborns/>)

I would have to agree with them. I witnessed my brother for years fight the demons of fetal alcohol syndrome. I have heard that both of my grandmothers were treated with electrical shock back in the 1950s because of the demon of depression. My one grandmother not only had depression but also wrestled with the demon of paranoid schizophrenia. At one time, she had been prescribed the wrong medication and she spoke of rats crawling all over her. My daughter, Sarah, would cut herself inflicting pain just like the demonic man bruised himself with stones.

The power of the demons is shown when Jesus sends them into the herd of pigs which takes control sending them off the cliff. One commentator says, “When the unclean spirits enter the pigs, they drown themselves in the sea – committing mass suicide.” (Blessed Are the Crazy; by Sarah Griffith Lund; Chalice Press; 2014; p. 94) Some of us have seen the power of mental illness and the fight of the demons ending in suicide.

It is interesting that society didn’t want to have anything to do with this man. They wanted to chain him up and keep him out of their community. Even after the healing occurs, the people are not celebrating the wholeness that has been restored but they want to send Jesus packing for what happened to the pigs. It makes you wonder why society was more concerned about the material things than their neighbor.

Though, the real message in this story is in the healing. Yes, Jesus amazing power is shown through the miracle of destroying the demons. But, it doesn’t stop there. He also refuses to let this man go with him when he asks to get into the boat and follow him. Instead, he tells him to go back to his community and share his story with them. Jesus wants him tell them what happened. The result scripture tells us is that everyone was amazed or as The Message says, “He was the talk of the town.”

The Rev. Sarah Griffith Lund was challenged at a Women’s Clergy gathering to write down her story. She has a very painful family history of mental illness. She didn’t realize the burden that had been imprisoned inside of her for many years. She had been keeping secrets because of the pain and embarrassment. It was truly freeing when she released the truth.

She opens up and shares in her beautifully written book called, “Blessed Are the Crazy”. It was only then did she find God’s healing presence. (Blessed Are the Crazy; by Sarah Griffith Lund; Chalice Press; 2014)

Sarah speaks about the crazy that was in the family blood. It started with her father who was bipolar and throughout his lifetime did not take medication. He was very abusive especially to her brothers. She was afraid of his terrible mood swings. She remembers asking God, “why wasn’t her home a place of love?” Her mother finally left her father

taking her and her siblings to live with her grandparents. There was some contact with her dad after this but it remained a strained relationship up until his death, many years later.

Crazy in the blood continued to run with Sarah's constant support for her brother, Scott, who is also bipolar. He has struggled severely with how society excludes and shames people with mental illness. He will go off his medication from time to time and turn to alcohol. He has been suicidal numerous times. Sarah has witnessed Steve's marriage crumble because of his illness. But through the amazing love of family and God, Sarah has seen Scott persevere. It was Scott (out of all the children) who was able to forgive and have a special bond with her dad. Sarah asked Scott, "What would you want the people reading my book to know?" His response, "I wished society treated mental illness just like any other illness."

Crazy in the blood didn't stop with dad or brother; Sarah goes on to share about her cousin who was severely abused as a child. When removed from his biological parents, he was sent to a foster home where he also was abused. Along with the abuse, he suffered from mental illness. This illness spiraled out of control where he ended up raping and killing a woman. Sarah finds herself being asked to serve as her cousin's Spiritual Advisor as he waits out his sentence on death row. She was there when he was executed. Through this journey with her cousin, she had witnessed his growing faith in God. Sarah shared that on the day that Paul, her cousin, died that she felt a part of her as well as a part of God died too.

Throughout this life of horrible pain and suffering, Sarah shares that she always felt the presence of God. Even in the times of wandering through the desert, God was there. But she urges churches to be an open sanctuary for people who are struggling with mental illness. We can offer healing when we offer a safe place of acceptance to hear people's stories. Don't be judgmental - offer unconditional love! We can encourage them and guide them to seek therapy and to use medication. We can pray with them and for them as they go through life's obstacles. We can be a great support system as we can share in the burden of carrying their cross of mental illness.

Jesus challenges us in this story to be part of the healing process. This can be very humbling. It can also be challenging. Chaplain Robert Uken writes:
We like to be able to pray and see God at work healing, but when this doesn't happen the way we expect, our own concept of prayer and God is challenged. To rethink, to wrestle with God as well as ourselves is a frightening task. The faith community enters the painful realm of suffering. There is the additional burden of unanswered and unanswerable "Why?" How tempting it is to take the easier way of withdrawing or coming up with easy answers. How the faith community deals with persons with mental illness and their families depends on how well it deals with its own brokenness and the pain of life. Does the faith community give the impression that it is okay to be less than perfect? (Blessed Are the Crazy; by Sarah Griffith Lund; Chalice Press; 2014; p.85)

We are all God's children. We are all fully loved and created by God and nothing can separate us from this love. In Romans 8, we read that neither angels nor demons can separate us from Christ's love. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I don't think we can talk about mental illness without talking about suicide. Sometimes those struggles result in loved ones taking their own lives like my husband's cousin's daughter who could not bear the excruciating pain of endometriosis. She was 30 years old! Some may wonder where her soul is. But I believe God knows the hell that she experienced on this earth. Suicide is horrible and tragic. There is deep sorrow for her family. I am sure there are unanswered questions and guilt that the family and her friends could have done more for her. But God has claimed her. Courtney Crismore has been welcomed into the arms of God and made whole again in heaven. (Blessed Are the Crazy; by Sarah Griffith Lund; Chalice Press; 2014; p. 87, 94-95 / <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2014/10/sermon-on-suicide-caesar-and-beautiful-newborns/>)

To close, I share a prayer with you by Sarah Griffith Lund based off of Psalm 23. Let us pray, *Jesus is my light and gives me all that my spirit needs to carry on. God invites me to trust in divine love so that when the still water runs thick with crazy blood, my soul is restored. God leads me down paths of giving my testimony for the sake of healing. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of mental illness with crazy in the blood, I will fear no evil, for God is with me. God's Spirit comforts me. God prepares a table for all who carry the cross of mental illness; God makes sure there's abundance, more than enough of everything for everybody. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my crazy life. And I will be in the blessed presence of God's healing light and love forever. Amen.* (Blessed Are the Crazy; by Sarah Griffith Lund; Chalice Press; 2014; p.99)