

“Lord, I Believe – Help My Unbelief”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
John Knox Presbyterian Church – January 17, 2021

Mark 9:14-29

*“When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, ‘What are you arguing about with them?’ Someone from the crowd answered him, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.’ He answered them, ‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.’ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out, **‘I believe; help my unbelief!’** When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’”*

The last time I preached on mental illness was February 6, 2016. I began with statistics. Again today, I thought I would begin with sharing some numbers. Professor Sandro Galea, who is dean of the University of Boston Public Health, led a research team to study the impact the pandemic had on people’s mental health who are living in the US. On average 8.5% of the US adult population experience anxiety and depression. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the study shows that 27.8% of the adult population experience anxiety and depression. That is one in four people. They sighted that much of the increase was due to the lock down, death toll numbers, social disruption caused by physical distancing and economic devastation.

(<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/us-cases-of-depression-have-tripled-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>)

Now more than ever, it is important to learn about mental illness. It is a disease and whether there is a pandemic going on or one day when life goes back to normal, if that happens, we as Christians need to understand. We need to understand that this is an invisible disease. A person may look perfectly fine on the outside but inside there is brokenness. We need to understand so that when our loved one, friend, spouse, family member, colleague or we (ourselves) go through it we can be there and support them in their struggle. We can love them.

Our recent book study challenged a group of women from our church to talk about mental illness. We read and discussed Sharon Garlough Brown’s book, titled *Shades of Light*. This book is about a young woman, who from a very young age has suffered throughout her life with mental illness. This young woman is named Wren and her mental illness has been diagnosed as anxiety and depression. Her illness has at times allowed her to cope and function in society. Then, there are times, which this illness gets ahold of her and she falls into a deep hole not knowing how to get out. I will not give the plot away as you may want to read it. What I want to share is the insight that the mother of this young person had with our text in the Gospel of Mark today. (“Shades of Light” by Sharon Garlough Brown; Inter Varsity Press; 2019; Chapter 10 – p. 83-90)

Wren has had a very traumatic thing happen to her and has found herself in the abyss of drowning sadness, which has paralyzed her. She has called her mother, who lives several states away. Jamie, her mother, frantically begins making flight plans to come to her as she keeps her on the phone. In the meantime, she has her husband, Wren's stepdad, contact his aunt who lives in the same city as Wren. Thankfully, she immediately goes to be with her until Jamie arrives.

As Jamie arrives at the airport, she pulls out her Bible and turns to this passage in Mark. She finds comfort as a parent or any person, who is searching and seeking the support of Christ in a gut-wrenching time. ("Shades of Light" by Sharon Garlough Brown; Inter Varsity Press; 2019; Chapter 10 - p. 83-90)

Jesus has just returned from his transfiguration where his robe has turned to a dazzling white and Moses and Elijah have appeared to Peter, James and John. We really don't know why they are the three, who were picked or why the other disciples have been left behind. Perhaps, Jesus left some of the disciples behind to minister to the crowds.

Jesus finds them arguing with the scribes and inquires why. This doesn't get answered because the crowd has recognized Jesus and begins to close in on him. There is a father, who comes forward with his son. He desperately wants the unclean spirit, which has stolen his son's speech and sends him into terrible convulsing seizures, to be taken away. He wants healing for his son!

This father has asked the disciples to do it but they could not heal him. Jesus gets annoyed with the disciples saying, *"You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?"* One would wonder if the disciples were being petty about not being able to go with Peter, James and John causing them not to focus on their mission with the people. Perhaps, they were feeling insecure with the scribes present and later the failed healing of our ministry. Well, maybe? The scolding from Jesus doesn't last long.

Just as the boy is brought to Jesus, the evil spirit takes control of the boy's body and sends it into a convulsing mess. It is interesting that Jesus does not go right into healing mode but stops to ask, *"How long has this been happening to him?"* Wren's mother, Jamie, remarks how this touches her in a deep way. "How long has this been happening to him, to her, to you?" Jesus wants to hear the story. He knows how long this has been going on. But, he knows that when someone is allowed to tell their story that it provides healing. They are allowed to tell about their hurt. Jesus provides compassion.

I will never forget my cousin calling me on the phone to tell me her cousin (on her mother's side) had died. Now, I rarely talk to her or see her because she lives in New Mexico. I had only met her cousin a few times in my life and it was mostly when we were children. I don't really know why she called me. Perhaps, it was because I was a pastor or maybe because he was from Indianapolis. What I do know is that it was important to tell me that he had suffered from brain cancer and fought it with bold courage for several years. It was important to tell me that his faith in God had stayed strong until his last breath. It was important for her to tell me her story so that she could have healing from her mourning.

Jesus knows our sorrow and he wants to hear it. The father shares the suffering of the boy and tells his story. He ends, **"But, if you are able to do anything, take pity on us."** Do you hear the questioning in his voice? Jesus notices this and responds, "If you are able! All things can be done to the one that believes."

The father answers back, *"I believe, help my unbelief!"* How many times have we been there? We are people of faith. We are Christians. We believe in Jesus Christ. Last week, we touched or felt the water and some of us took a stone from out on the table remembering our baptisms. Yet,

there are times that we doubt. We fall short when the pain or challenge becomes overwhelming. How many times has this been our prayer, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!”

We hear that Jesus goes onto heal the boy of the unclean spirit. The boy is able to get up, walk, and talk. It is a miracle! It is clear that Christ has the power to heal.

But what happens when we don't receive the miracle that we have asked Jesus to give us? What happens when we have asked repeatedly in our prayers for healing, for answers, for miracles and we don't get it?

Jamie knows that Jesus has the power to completely heal Wren's mental illness and make her well for the rest of her life. But will Jesus be willing to do it? This is a bold question. She is reminded of a friend who challenged her by saying that Jesus has the power to heal us. Jesus also has the grace to sustain us. The healing is so much easier to receive. Is it not? The miracle is easier when it comes to our faith. But, holding on and believing even though the miracle does not happen, that is so much more difficult. If you have faith and believe, it should not matter if Jesus heals or gives grace to sustain you on your journey. God will be there seeing you through it no matter what. This is such a mature faith and as Jamie learns repeatedly, it may take a lifetime to get there. (“Shades of Light” by Sharon Garlough Brown; Inter Varsity Press; 2019; Chapter 10 – p. 83-90)

For Wren, the grace that Jesus gives to her to sustain her will be medicine and therapy through gifted doctors and therapists. It will also be through her church, family and friends who come alongside her to help her through the crashing storms, when they occur.

This book brings to light the fact that mental illness can happen to anyone even the faithful followers of Christ. It is an illness just like any other illness. We as the *church have to realize this*. *James Bryan Smith, the author of The Good and Beautiful God, writes, “Christians have not done well with the subject of mental illness. There is a great deal of stigma around the therapy process, calling people's struggles ‘a lack of faith’ or ‘sin in their life.’ Jesus keeps company with us in everything that is hard. He is a companion in sorrow.”* (“Shades of Light” by Sharon Garlough Brown; Inter Varsity Press; 2019; Foreword)

I have shared in the past that my children, my mother and grandmothers have and still do suffer from mental illness. It can be heartbreaking. It can also challenge a relationship. When it happens to you, it can be different. Two years ago, when my daughter's six month marriage began to crumble, I sensed some depression. I eventually got medicine and life seemed to be manageable. I could function. But when Covid hit and we had to socially distance and quarantine; and political and racial arrest occurred, which resulted in violence; and my dad fell and broke his neck. I really, really, really struggled! It took changing medication and seeing a therapist to help get me on track. (Thanks to my children to teach me that medicine and therapy, go hand in hand.) I found that this doesn't happen over a few weeks. It is not like taking an antibiotic. It takes time and patience. It is not something that you put in the bulletin for prayer concerns. That is for people with cancer, broken bones or facing surgery. I believe I am better. I am not 100%. Thankfully, I am focused on getting better and looking for Christ's grace to sustain me.

As this scripture in the Gospel of Mark ends, the disciples have Jesus in a private place and they ask why they could not cast out the unclean spirit. Jesus tells them that it could only be done through prayer.

Let us pray:

Jesus, you are our light and you give us all the grace to carry on. You invite us to trust in divine love so that when we fall down you are there to grant grace and sustain us. God help us to know that to tell our story or to listen to another's story is done for the sake of healing. Even though we may face mental illness in our journey you, O Lord are with us.

Your Spirit comforts us. Even when we doubt and we ask for you to help our unbelief; God, you show us that there is abundance in your love and grace. Enough for everyone. Surely goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our chaotic, crazy life. And, we will be in the blessed presence of your healing light and love forever. Amen. (adapted from Blessed Are the Crazy; by Sarah Griffith Lund; Chalice Press; 2014; p.99)