Tuesday morning I woke up and began my day the same way I have for the last several months. I rolled over and picked up my phone. Turned the alarm off and went to the New York Times app, not to read the news, but to play the game, Wordle. If you are unfamiliar with Wordle, let me explain. Every day there is a word of the day. The word contains 5 letters and you are given 5 chances to guess the correct word. When you get a letter that is in the word correct, the letter turns to yellow. If you get a letter in the correct spot, it turns green. Letters not used turn gray. I always begin with the same word, IRATE, which is how I sometimes feel when I play wordle. I-R-A-T-E. The A and T turned yellow and the E turned green. So I began to try and figure out the word and I came up with a second word, which I don’t remember, but it was wrong. Then the lightbulb went off and I got the word right. Do you play? Do you remember Tuesday’s word? The word was, “Atone.”

Atone. The word sat with me all day. Actually all week. As I worked on my sermon the word, “Atone” sat close in my thoughts and in my heart. Atone. According to Miriam Webster when the word first came into the English language it meant, “to reconcile,” and suggested the restoration of a peaceful and harmonious state. After reading each of the lectionary texts for this week, I could not think of a better word to describe the needs of the characters we meet. Everyone is feeling unharmonious in some way.

Each of the chosen texts for this week’s lectionary has an underlying sense of despair, depression, grief, shame, guilt, anxiety…all the words that can be used to describe a poor state of mental, emotional and even spiritual health.

In 1Kings Elijah has gotten word that all the prophets have been killed, and he flees. He takes himself on a journey into the wilderness. He sits under a solitary broom tree. It is there that he ask that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.” He is literally begging God to end his life.

In the Psalms we hear the psalmist proclaim that their soul is longing for God. “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’”

“5Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?”

The writer feels as if their soul is unsettled. Looking for hope and feeling hopeless as their soul longs for God.

In Galatians, the people are struggling to work harmoniously and instead continue to make divisions amongst themselves. Paul is reminding the people that the divisions that separate us, shame us, enslave us…those divisions are a thing of the past for now we are all one through Christ.

This brings us to the text from Luke.

A man living in a tomb. He is cast out of his community. The voices in his head, those he lives with, have taken over. He has been deemed unclean. Living in a tomb, which in itself is labeled unclean. It is said that the community would white wash the tombs so people knew to stay away. Can you imagine, finding yourself in a place of such darkness and chaos in your mind that you find yourself literally living in a place of shadows and death? Can you imagine? I bet some of us can. I bet there are some in our midst who have been to the edge and remember the struggle.

For this man, in Luke, he was living in a tomb, a place used for the dead. Living among his own filth, in darkness. Small and cramped. Just him and his mind. If we were to modernize this scene it may be in a small padded cell and include a strait jacket. Yes, if this were today we would not call these demons, but rather we would say this man suffers from mental illness. The irony is that even today, the idea of mental illness carries the same loneliness, guilt and shame this man endured. We have NOT come very far in our views and the stigma of mental health continues to be one where we keep quiet for fear of having our mental health held against us in some way or form.

And along comes Jesus and he helps this man. When everyone else kept their distance, he comes to help. He sends the voices or demonic vices out of him. They negotiate, “Don’t send us into the abyss.” Instead they are sent into the herd of pigs, which were also seen as unclean. The pigs find their way to the cliffs and end up in the lake and drown. Evil self-destructs, but not before it causes an awful lot of destruction itself.

The man is healed and Jesus sends him home to tell what great things God has done for him. There is harmony once more in the life of this man.

I am aware that preaching a sermon that deals with mental health is tricky, and complicated. Especially when this is seen in the context of a healing story. We often wonder why Jesus has not healed our loved ones or even ourselves. Why must we continue to live with this debilitating grief and shame? I heard a preacher on television once say that if you loved Jesus enough you wouldn’t be sad or depressed. I have never been angrier to hear such irresponsible words said from a pulpit. That’s like saying that if you loved Jesus enough you would never get sick or have cancer or grieve the loss of a loved one. No, saying you need to love Jesus more is not the answer to our health issues. And saying so is a dangerous thing to suggest. If that was the case, no one would ever be able to live up to that false expectation of perfectionism. So, for me, this is not a story about Jesus’ power to heal. This is a story about compassion and care and letting go of shame and being brought out of the darkness of death’s tomb and being able to live into the light. This is a story about restoring harmony and reconciling a man to his community.

Where are we in this story? For some of us we are the man with the many demons. For others of us, we are Jesus, showing compassion and care and doing what we can to restore harmony into the lives of others.

There was a man who decided to visit a church one Sunday. He walked in and everyone stopped to look at him. His clothes were dirty. His hair was a mess. He had not shaved in a while. He carried with him this large, extremely heavy duffle bag. He walked in and sat down in the church pew. People stared at him. He sat alone. No one offered to sit with him. During the time of announcements the pastor invited everyone for cookies and coffee following worship. He had not had a thing to eat since the day before and he made his way after service to the cookie table. No one spoke. They moved out of his way. He took a cookie and cup of coffee. Feeling unwelcome he finally made his way to the door and left. For the next couple of weeks he thought about going back to church. He almost decided to never go again, when he thought maybe he should try a new place.

He walked into worship at this other church. Hair a mess, clothes dirty, carrying that heavy duffle bag. As he walked in, he was met by a greeter who welcomed him and asked if he was visiting and if he needed anything. He entered the sanctuary and found a place to sit and sat his large duffle bag on the pew beside him.

An older gentleman walked up and asked how he was and introduced himself. During the announcements the minister of this church invited everyone to stay after for cookies and coffee. Following worship, the man lifted up that heavy duffle bag and walked to the cookie table. His bag slipped off his shoulder at one point and a young man, in his 20’s asked, “Can I help you with your bag?” And he bent down and helped him lift it. “That is one heavy bag you have,” he said.

A few moments later an older woman approached the man and asked if she could help with his bag, it looked so heavy. He sat in a chair with his cookie and coffee when another person approached him asking if he needed help with anything. Finally a small child walked up, a little girl. She looked curiously at the man and the duffle bag. She walked over to the stranger and placed her small hands on the sides of his face and said, “Mister, that’s a big bag. What are you carrying around?”

The man unzipped the bag and the little girl looked in, “That’s a lot of stuff.” She ran and got her dad and said, “Daddy, we need to help him. Look in his bag.”

The little girl’s father ran over and looked in the bag. “How long have you been carrying all this with you?” He asked. “A very long time,” Said the man. “Let us help you,” said the father, “no one should have to carry this alone.”

So the father reached into the bag and pulled out the man’s addiction and said, “We can help you get the recovery you need.” The older gentleman who had greeted the man before church said, “Let me see how I can help.” He reached in and pulled out PTSD and said, “I’m a veteran, I’ve been there. Let me help.” The older lady reached in and said, “I want to take away your hunger. Let me find you something good to eat. More than a cookie.” The 20 something year old who helped him lift his bag said, “I want to help too. Let me take this shame from you. Let it go. We’ve got you.” The little girl reached in and said, “What does this one say?” The man looked at her and said, “Loneliness.” The little girl smiled at the man and said, “You don’t need to be lonely anymore. You’ve got us.” Others came around and collected grief, despair, heartache, and trauma. Eventually the man’s duffle bag was once again manageable and the community of that church helped free this man of the tomb in which he had been living.

We, friends, as followers of Christ, are not to judge others for the baggage they carry or the health crisis they may have either physically or mentally. As followers of Christ, we are to be the ones who do what we can to help bring about healing and wholeness and reconciliation. We are to help bring harmony to the disrupted lives of those in our midst. We can help bring atonement and salvation simply by being the hands and feet of Christ in our world. We can be the first type of church the man visited, the ones who refuse to show compassion, or we can be the one who makes certain to break down the divisions and help one another so that none find themselves living in the tomb.

It is our duty as followers of Christ to break the stigmas that separate us and to do our best to help others with their burdens. Sometimes; however, all of our work may seem to be for nothing. People still struggle and end up with issues and problems and health concerns. There is still death: physical, emotional and spiritual death. But, it’s not for nothing. Every little bit we do makes a difference. And when someone falls to illness, this is when we work together to make certain that we continue to be people who hold one another during periods of grief and mourning. We make certain to be there for one another and for the community that surrounds us.

May we continue to live into being the people God calls us to be. May we be the healing hands and heart of Christ in a world that feels broken and whose soul is longing for God. May we be filled the Spirit that we see everyone as a beloved child of God and in need of care and compassion. Not just those who are like us, but all we meet. May we help lighten the load of our fellow siblings through Christ. May we be an ear to hear, hands to hold, and hearts to love so that ALL may experience the healing powers of Christ. So ALL may be restored to harmony. Amen.