

Message for 3-6-22

Shared by Rev. Ken Heintzelman

They came to the other side of the lake, 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 any more, 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 permitted them. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake. (Mark 5)

I had the privilege to work as a case manager for a community mental health center. I worked there during a time when our nation was closing down mental health inpatient facilities. As mental health services decreased there was an increase in the homeless population. Our job was to engage homeless mentally ill people and connect them to resources and get them shelter. I met some hurting and wonderful people in my work through the mental health center.

I remember one man and his name really was John. John was a very big man. He was about 6' 4" and probably weighed 350 pounds. He wore a cowboy hat, bright clothes, and suspenders. John was brilliant. He was a member of several states and national mental health boards and task forces. He was a voice for people struggling with mental illness who had no voice. One day he said he knew he was not doing well and he wanted to go to the hospital. He was sharing about his struggle with paranoia, depression, and schizophrenia. He knew he was on a

steady slide toward a state of mind. He knew he needed a medication consult, a safe place, and a more intentional village for just a brief time. He knew that he would not recognize he needed help soon and then his homeless cycle would start over again. He would lose his apartment, his food stamps, his medical insurance, his medications, his social network, and he would get lost on the streets again. Our team knew that if he did not get the help he would have to start all over again if we could find him and if he stayed alive. So, we went to the hospital.

We went to the admissions desk because we did not want to use up emergency room resources nor create another expense. As case managers, we could request an intake interview and then a judge would have to issue an emergency order based on the premise that John was a danger to himself or someone else. There was no middle ground. Thirty years later there still is no middle ground that allows for intervention before things get too bad unless you have a lot of resources. The number of tragedies because of medical, justice, and mental health systems breakdown is legion. I sat next to John as the hospital admission unfolded. It was long, painful, and dehumanizing. John kept pleading to be taken out of the public office environment but they wouldn't do it. Finally, he winked at me and turned to the office person and bowed up, and said, "Please take me to the unit now and let's finish the paperwork there before I start breaking furniture." Her eyes got real big and she said, "Okay, let me get a wheelchair." She left her desk. He winked at me again. In five minutes he was on the psychiatric unit. I knew John for a couple of years and I will never forget when he said to me, "It's hard to be a real person in an unreal world".

There are times when our medical, judicial, and mental health systems get it right but there are too many times when we do not. This is true of the Church as well.

Let us pray.

Spirit of Life and Love, sometimes we fall short and add to the trauma of people's lives and cause more injury to their souls. We confess this not to wallow in guilt and shame but to name the demons of fear and cluelessness that sometimes plagues your people. In such naming may we have the power to do better and add to the healing of the world. Amen.

The Word About Life is the story about the man possessed who lived among the tombs. It is a story that is sometimes used to talk about the way Jesus can heal mental illness. This is wrong. A surface reading of the story conveys all the ways the Church can cause trauma.

Mental Health Abuse

- You need to be “delivered” from your addiction, depression, paranoia, anxiety.
- It is a sign of your spiritual weakness/moral depravity/character flaw.
- Instruction to pray/fast/study scripture instead of seeking professional help.
- Dismissing your thoughts and emotions because “God is in control.”
- Saying therapy is not of God because it means you think God is not capable or willing to “heal” you

I am trying to thread a needle here. It is not a story about how to heal someone of mental illness. It is a story to talk about the power of life and love over the death-dealing systems of the world. The name of the demon is “Legion” which is a military unit of Roman oppression. If we compare the ancient depiction of the demon-possessed man with a contemporary diagnosis of mental illness then we do the story and people who struggle with their mental health a great disservice. People who struggle with mental health, as I do with depression, are not possessed, nor are we healed by an exorcism. However, there is something that the story does get right. First and foremost Jesus connects with the man in a caring and nonjudgmental way. From that foundation of acceptance, healing can happen.

One of the highly recommended training for pastors is called Clinical Pastoral Education or CPE for short. It is an intensive experience of being in hospital settings and giving clinical accounts of our experiences including what we are experiencing internally. What did we see? What did we smell? What did we feel? What was said? What are our filters that affect our experiences and influence our interpretation of those experiences? It is like an intensive emotional Bootcamp.

Anton Boisen is one of the leading founders of Clinical Pastoral Education. He was a pastor in the first half of the last century. In his work as a hospital and state hospital chaplain, he was institutionalized several times for schizophrenia. He

brought together his personal experience of a psychotic break, with his training as a pastor, with his self-understanding as a person of faith. Out of his total life experience, he proposed that his psychotic breaks were opportunities to grow spiritually. Because of his personal experience, he made a hopeful proposal. Boisen explored the concept that mental illness represents a crisis brought about by the failure to grow into higher social attachments, including loyalty to God. In this way, mental illness was not just a break from reality but a breaking of one reality that does not work so that a new and better reality can emerge.

My own experience as a case manager affirms the place of religious concepts in the healing of mental illness. There are all kinds of insights, tools, and techniques in the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, and counseling. However, I also witnessed the power the religious concepts of forgiveness, accountability, love, and community have in the process of healing mental illness.

Religion and faith communities are not antithetical to healing. Religion and faith communities can add to the trauma and burden a person is already carrying, or they can be instruments of healing and support. We choose to be instruments of healing and support. The story is not over. It has more than a happy ending.

As Jesus 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 Spirit of Life and Love has done for you, and what mercy has been shown you.' And the man went away and began to proclaim in the region of 10 cities how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

The wounded man became a healer. Perhaps his break with reality was related to grief and loss. He was found wandering among the tombs. Perhaps his break with reality began to heal when Jesus did not run the other way in fear or feeling uncomfortable but got out of the safety of the boat and connected with him. The healing of the wounded mind and soul included the honest naming of the brokenness. Finally, the healing was complete but the cracks of the mind and soul could still be seen and felt by him and everyone who met him. Yet, he became a wounded healer and everyone was amazed.