

A Whole and Holy Mind

Luke 5:1-20

Sermon by Joanne Gallardo

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⁵ They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes.^[a] ² When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³ This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴ For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷ He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" ⁸ For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!"

⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." ¹⁰ And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹ A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹² The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." ¹³ He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

¹⁴ Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. ¹⁵ When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. ¹⁷ Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

¹⁸ As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹ Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ²⁰ So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis^[b] how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

I almost called this sermon "yet another mental health sermon" because I feel that either I preach on this subject often or I hear others doing so. And these sermons vary. I've heard sermons that would have people "delivered" from the "demon" of mental illness, I've heard sermons that promote the power of positive thinking. I've heard sermons that "other" people with mental illness with such intensity that people leave afraid of talking to or about people who struggle mentally. This is not at all meant to be a corrective to any of that, I can't say that this sermon will be any better. But in this day of calling our schedules "crazy," our work projects "insane," and the weather "bipolar," I thought we may want to take a look at the church and its relationship to mental illness.

This scripture that was read from Mark disturbs me, and that is one of the main reasons why I chose it. The man described is experiencing mental

health symptoms. He is also demon possessed. Later on in this sermon I will reiterate what I'm about to say now: I don't believe mentally ill people are demon possessed. I know that there are many things that happen in the spiritual realm that I do not understand, but I do know that when I hear hoofs, I should think horses and not zebras or unicorns. Many have taken this scripture and twisted it in such a way that it sounds like those who experience symptoms similar to this man's must be demon possessed. With modern psychiatry, science, and general understanding of trauma and recovery, we now know the brain can become ill in the same way our bodies can due to any number of factors. Demon possession is no longer the ONLY explanation for such behavior. So I'd like us to leave the demon possession out of this story for a minute.

Jesus encounters a man. He lives by the tombs. People had literally chained him as if he were some wild, dangerous animal. I'm assuming he was big and strong, because no one could keep him from hurting himself. He would cry out and cut himself with what was available to him, which were stones. We don't know of his parents, siblings, or other family. We don't know where he's from, we don't even know his name. Obviously Jesus is the point of this story, not the man, but sometimes I wonder how different things would be if those who feel afflicted get to tell the story from their perspective. I imagine it would be something like this.

I don't know what's wrong with me. I must be dangerous, because people have been trying to chain me. I don't want to be chained, I want to be free! I don't want to hurt anybody, I just want to have my life back. I wonder if I still have a life. I don't know how to express the mess that is going on inside my mind so I cry. I cry like I did when I was little. I can't help it. I want to harm myself to try and get out that which is hurting me inside my head. No one would believe me if I said I was hurting inside my head. Cuts they can see. Maybe if they see that I'm hurt on the outside someone will come help me with what's going on on the inside. I see a man they call Jesus, he's all the way over there. If I get his attention, maybe, just maybe, he can help me.

He does get Jesus' attention, another miracle occurs, and he is free from his affliction. Jesus has set him free.

If only it were so easy for those of us who struggle with our minds.

I have seen and worked with people like the man in this story from Mark. Depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, bulimia, anorexia, borderline personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, bipolar disorder, we all have friends or family who have been touched with this type of illness. I've heard people talk about such things in hushed, shameful tones...tones they wouldn't use if the person were struggling with a physical illness. Tones that suggest that such illness is less common than it actually is.

I feel comfortable talking about this subject because I've lived with it, lived it, and have worked with it. In fact, a lot of times mentally ill folks make me feel more comfortable and at home than people who don't have mental illness. I can be who I am, no filtering, no pretending, because we get pretending and we don't buy it.

But for many people, this is a source of great shame or discomfort. And I get that. The media portrays people with mental illness as killers, psychopaths, vagrants, relationship destroyers, inhuman, crazy, insane, and all around difficult. Don't get me wrong, there are violent people who have mental illnesses. There are difficult people who have mental illnesses. Mental illness can destroy relationships.

But imagine living your life just knowing in your core that people can read your thoughts. Or hearing things that other people aren't hearing. Living with this sense of impending doom. Living knowing you're never going to be good enough, at least, not by your standards. Living not really knowing who you are, deep down. Feeling obese while your doctor is telling you that you need to eat more. Being told to "calm down" by people who don't know what real fear is. If that were you, maybe you would lash out, too. Or end a relationship because it all just became too difficult. This is not an excuse for certain behavior, but if we thought about it, it might just explain a few things that sometimes leave us scratching our heads.

My experience with mental illness started when I was very young. My mother was bipolar, and she was fun, exciting, bold, candid, and admirably aggressive. My brother had schizoaffective disorder as well as some cognitive disabilities, and I thought he was fun, funny, a dreamer, and a historian. We put the "fun" in dysfunctional! But there were also really, really bad times.

When I was very young, I would worry. My mother would call me a worry wort. It started off as how a typical perfectionist might worry about not doing something right. But one day I was playing with a barrette in my hair at a restaurant. I went to the restroom, came back, and noticed it was missing. I went into a panic. I ran back to the restroom, and there it was, on the floor. But that tipped off something in my head that had me constantly worrying. Was I leaving things behind?

This worry consumed me. I would go back and retrace steps, re-check rooms, look under covers, yet nothing would ease my worry. From the pulpit I heard many sermons about how God is in control, and how one shouldn't worry about their life. Consider the lilies, after all. And I did believe that, with all my heart. Then why was my brain so obsessed with things that were impossible? I prayed that my worry would go away, I prayed that it would stop growing and spreading to other things, I remembered the suffering of Jesus, and how worried HE must have been, and how my worry paled in comparison. But still, the anxiety persisted.

The obsessions went away as I grew older. I didn't worry about leaving things places, I stopped retracing my steps, and kept any sort of outward rituals at bay. But I never did stop worrying. In my college years, worrying turned into depression and worrying. Meanwhile, I was having some of the best spiritual experiences of my life! My faith was super strong. AND yet. And yet I was still experiencing some of the worst anxiety and depression I had experienced up to that point. I was very high functioning. So high functioning, in fact, that unless I told people who knew me moderately well they usually didn't know what was going on. And I liked it that way. My family had mentally ill people, and I knew how visible that was. If no one could tell that I was worrying myself sick, then I was doing a "good job."

This was all compounded by my endless supply of energy. My mind as well as my body does not tire quickly. This is a trait I got from my father. We say "yes" to all the things, get involved as much as we can, and at the end of the day, we're not tired! We can say "yes" to something else! So my mind said "yes" to more worrying. I had the mental energy to worry, so I worried.

My 20s were full of figuring things out on a number of levels, and that included finding the right combination of medication, therapy, and self care that really fit my anxious and depressed thoughts. After a round of panic attacks in my late 20s, I re-assessed my wellness plan, and have since

been taking steps to keep anxiety at bay in my daily life. It's not always successful, but most of the time it works for me.

Part of what helps me is to plan for what can be planned in my life. Lists help. I plan every minute of every vacation, I even plan "unstructured time." I plan for the next day by figuring out what I want to wear down to what lipstick I think I want to wear for the day. I make sure my day starts with coffee and that I follow my list. If something jumps in and messes up my plans, I adjust and make new plans. I plan my bedtime routines. I figure out what I'm going to read before I fall asleep. And there are times when unexpected things happen. This usually results in me feeling overwhelmed and unstable, but I have a plan for those times, too. But nothing is perfect. Grocery stores still stress me out because I'm afraid I'll get the wrong thing, or that there's something I left off my list. Organizing overwhelms me because what if it's the wrong system? What if it's too organized and I forget where I put things? I even get anxiety picking out candles. But I work with it, and I deal, and I live what I consider to be a pretty normal life, with just a tad more worrying than the average person.

But I am privileged. I don't have an everyday life debilitating mental illness. I have a support system. I have the luxury of choosing whether or not to tell people that I even struggle with these things. I'm employed. I'm housed. I have reliable transportation to get me to appointments and I have enough money to pay for the medication I need. I'm insured. I lived in a family that understood what it's like to be different. I have friends who "get me." I have people there to reassure me that I'm ok right now, and that I'm going to be ok in the future.

But the man in our scripture did not have that luxury. Instead of being talked to, he was chained up. Mentally ill people can exhaust their support systems, for very valid reasons, and have no one left. Those who support them can feel unsupported. Intentionally or unintentionally, we add to the chains of mentally ill people when we are not cared for ourselves. We add to the chains when we don't see the humanity in others. We add to the chains when we stigmatize others who may operate differently from us.

In our story from Mark, Jesus is not afraid to take on this man's burdens, behavior, or whatever other baggage he might be carrying. In fact, he performs a miracle and cures him. The man is so grateful that he want to

get in the boat with Jesus. Instead, Jesus gives the man a mission to spread the news about the healing power of Jesus.

So what does all this have to do with church? If the Gospels tell us anything, it's that our salvation and our connection to the divine is tied up in our neighbor. Not just the neighbors "like us" but the neighbors that maybe we choose not to see. This man in the Gospel story, and others like him, are our neighbor. So with our recent discussions on being welcoming, inclusive, and affirming, what does that look like across the board? What does that look like for our neighbors who may be struggling with illnesses of the mind?

I think this can be addressed in three ways 1) Let's talk about it. The more we avoid the subject, the more secrecy and mystery surrounds it. We have no problem talking about it when violence happens and the only way we can justify our violent society is to blame things on mental health. We also talk about it for a few days after someone dies after succumbing to that which has plagued their mind. We holler about greater access to mental health resources, we talk about legislation, and then we forget about it until something tragic happens again. There is not a person in this room who has not been touched by mental illness in some way, whether that is personally, a close family member, or a friend. If we had the courage to talk about our struggles, or the struggles we see, maybe talking about such things could be a bit more normalized and not have such a stigma attached to it. If we brought our whole selves to our prayer life, to our church life, and to our community life, maybe someone who is struggling won't feel quite so alone. And if one person feels a little less alone and a little more cared for by God and others, I would call our efforts more than worth it.

2) Remember that each one of us is holy. Our minds are, in essence, holy, just as we are holy. A physical body is not any less holy just because it is suffering, a mind is no less holy because it is suffering. It is still beloved and cherished by God in the midst of its struggling. This does not mean that we give up on prayer for our physical and mental selves to be made "whole," but it does mean that whether whole, or ill, or broken, or struggling, we are still beloved, holy saints serving a whole and loving God.

3) Be the loving community that God has created us to be. If we are to be the welcoming community we are striving to be, we welcome not only people from other cultures or people with different sexual orientations, but

we welcome people whose minds may be at a different level of health than our own. We can be a welcoming community that can accommodate behaviors different from our own. We can be the kind of church that supports those who are struggling with mental health. We can be the kind of church that supports efforts in our community to make mental health services more accessible to more people. We can start seeing people getting the whole healthcare that they need as a justice issue. We have the ability to be supportive of those in our own community and those who are close to our community with our prayers and with our actions.

I do not see “demon possession” as was the case in this Gospel story, as the explanation behind those who struggle with mental health. I see that comparison as hurtful, unhelpful, and inaccurate. In the end, I don’t really care what it was that was going on with this man in our story, but I do know that his behavior is behavior I’ve seen before with folks who struggle with mental wellness, particularly those who suffer to a severe degree. In the case of our story, an encounter with Jesus made him well, as was the case with many afflicted folks who encountered Jesus. But we all know that both help and healing come from God in many forms. We also know that things can take time and aren’t always instantaneous. How can we, as the community of Christ, encounter others in such a way that their lives are changed? That OUR lives are changed? If we can be the one place in the world where people who are not doing well can bring their whole selves, where people who are struggling can bring their concerns, where people who are mentally ill can ask for healing, how do we respond? How do we act? What do we say? I think it might sound something like, “Hi, I’m glad you’re here today.” “Welcome, the peace of Christ be with you.” “It’s so good to see you.” May our actions toward our neighbors, especially our struggling neighbors, remind us that our whole selves are holy, our whole selves are beloved, and are whole selves are welcomed not only by Christ himself but by God, the knower and creator of all good things. Amen.