

“To Heal”

Mark 5:1-20

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When I think of the human mind, I am instantly in awe. It has to be right up there on God's top ten list of creative masterpieces. I think right away of Pastor Joseph Sitler, a Lutheran clergyman from the Chicago area. As an 82 year old man, he describes walking into a large department store, the kind where they have the perfume counter right there by the entryway. He says he took one whiff of a certain scent, and in less than an instant, in the snap of a finger; he was in the backseat of a 37 Buick with a girl named Eleanor. As complex as the modern computer is, he says, it doesn't hold a candle to the human mind! All those mental processes that go on up there continue to thrill me and to mystify me and to renew my respect for the Creator.

My brother, Tommy, got to work on the Academy Award winning film, A Beautiful Mind, starring Russell Crowe. Set on the campus of Princeton University, we meet a man, Dr. John Nash, a real person, not a fictional character, who lives with schizophrenia. He carries on conversations with people who do not exist in reality. He is also a PhD economist who discovers a principle of equanimity that holds the potential for world peace. The same mind that sees what is not there also sees what the whole world desperately needs to see. Though his classmates mocked him for his mental illness, the delegates who hand out the Nobel Prize valued him above everyone else in his field! I tell you, the human mind is God's best handiwork.

Now, we come to the Gerasene demoniac. This man clearly suffers with an unnamed mental illness. Mark's description of him lets us draw that conclusion. But what compounds his suffering is the utter abandonment he is forced to experience from his own community. This man lives in the cemetery! It's as if his community thinks of him as dead! Dead to his family, dead to his friends, dead to the world. He lives in exile, chained to the tombstones! The townspeople are afraid of him. He is as strong as an ox. He is wild like a grizzly bear! He is out of control! **His community has identified him by his mental affliction. He's been labeled! He is a crazy man, possessed.**

This man will not be healed until someone comes along who will define him as a person of worth, as a child of God, as a divine creation. This is essentially what Jesus does. He looks into this man's being. He sees the illness that has taken over this man's mind, but he sees there is more to the man than the demons who possess him. Jesus refuses to identify him by his diagnosis: bipolar, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive; he identifies him as a human being who has a soul, who is of as much worth as anybody else! **This is where the healing always begins!**

I can not read this text without reflecting on my sister Debbie's mental illness. She lived with a bi-polar depression. She lived on the extremes. One day she could be lethargic, nearly catatonic; another day she could be the life of the party, high as a kite, exuding more energy than all of the rest of the people in the room combined! Growing up with Debbie, we didn't know any better. We fell victim to that seduction of labeling her. She was our Gerasene demoniac. But as we began to move beyond that, as we began to see her as a person who had come from the same womb as we did, as we began to see her as a daughter, a sister, a person God had made...then she became our teacher! She became our teacher!

She taught us about affection. This sister of ours loved like no one I have ever known, before or since. She loved without shame, without embarrassment! Getting a postcard from her was like receiving a king's ransom. On the postcard, there would be the message and her signature. But then there would be the X's and the O's, too many to count! X's across the bottom, O's up the side, more X's around the postage stamp, more O's spilling over onto the front of the card! Kisses and hugs in every direction! The X's and O's became the message! You couldn't receive a Debbie postcard and not know you were loved. It was her unbridled affection, her uninhibited, unabashed, gushy love that defined her, not her mental illness.

At the end of Mark's story, the people in the community are stunned to see this man at peace, no longer a threat to anyone, no longer shattering shackles. They are amazed! Nothing like this has ever happened before! They had no idea of the miracle that happens when you distinguish the individual from the illness.

Now, this is precisely what our work is today. We are to be that radically different church community that will not tolerate discrimination based upon mental illness. We will not tolerate it within our walls or outside our walls. And we know the discrimination persists. It's still a risk to reveal even to a friend that I have depression or that I have anxiety attacks or that I think about ending my life or that I've been having these nightmares. It's still a risk to fill out an employment application and tell the whole truth. It's still a risk to be the person we are. The labels are still out there. So, our work, our ministry is to create a community where everyone is identified by what redeems us not by what reduces us.

In the Biblical narrative there is a hint of what I call a double healing. On a first read of the story of the Gerasene demoniac, the reader sees that one person has been healed. But on a second reading or perhaps a fifth or a sixth reading, one begins to see that perhaps the whole community experiences a kind of healing. It is the healing that comes when one lays aside that prejudicial thinking, that tendency to identify a person by his or her diagnosis rather than by the divinity of his or her humanity.

This has been a wonderful week of Mental Health Awareness. We have found in the Biblical story for today a theological foundation for ministry in settings where mental health is at stake. I share this reflection, as I always do, in the greatest of hope! Amen!