

Sermon: Chained Among Tombs**Scripture: Luke 8:26-39****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: September 25, 2016**

This is the first time in over 17 years of preaching that I have focused a sermon on mental illness. And I've learned that I am not alone in that – there are a lot of preachers have rarely if ever preached on the subject. As I prepared for this sermon by reading and talking with a number of people on the subject, I realized *why* not many preachers go there, because mental illness is massively complex and because people all over the place suffer quietly and deeply from it. Therefore a 15-minute sermon on faith and mental illness is rather fraught with the possibility of over-simplification, misrepresentation, inadequate illustration, mis-application and misunderstanding. But what the heck, I'm going to step right in here and give it a shot (haha!) and ask for you to take what you can from what I offer and leave what is not helpful. I approach this like I do all my sermons mindful of the miracle of the loaves and fishes – that whatever loaf or fish I offer up here, I try to trust that God can multiply or transform it into something that might convey God's word for you today.

I chose this scripture of the Gerasene Demoniac not to complicate things further by reintroducing the notion of the demonic into the equation. I think we'd all agree it has been a positive move in the modern world that we've come to understand more about illnesses of the brain and do not have to resort to supernatural explanations for psychiatric disorders. But still this 1st century text is so evocative for drawing out a myriad of issues that surround mental illness in our 21st

century world and I think it points us to where we might catch a glimpse of God in the midst of it all.

Manic-depressive or bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress, depression, addiction, anorexia and bulimia, multiple personality disorder, attention deficit disorder, etc...these are just some of the terms that brain science and psychology have begun to use to name the illnesses that effect the way the brain functions which then effects the way the mind operates, which then effects the way a person behaves in their world. What we consider as normal functioning in daily life and healthy relating to self and others is hindered, blocked, or subverted by a mental illness and one's capacity to live fully is diminished – so they can be like those chained among tombs rather than thriving among the living. In depression this might look like simply being unable to find the motivation to get oneself out of bed and accomplish simple tasks. In anorexia this presents as depriving the body of needed food. In post-traumatic stress this might result in a person being unable to breath fully when an event triggers stress. In borderline personality this can look like cutting oneself as an external expression of the internal anguish one is bearing. However the mind trips into self-destructive behavior, the ill-health is a disease of the brain. Whether environmental factors cause the mental illness or genetics or a combination of genetic predisposition and external factors, remains largely a mystery, which contributes to the fear and the stigma that surrounds it. We have come so far in our understanding but still there is so far to go and whether conscious or not if we are not careful we can ostracize those with mental illness because of our own discomfort, fear and judgment.

This is what the people of Gerasa did with the man in this morning's text. They drove him out of the town and chained him among the tombs where he would be less likely to hurt others or himself. His life, in many ways, was a living death – powerful imagery for the illness of depression, isn't it? So the scriptures refer to him being out of his mind and inhabited NOT by a demonic force... but by a legion of demons who are so full of fury that when they are released from him they enter into thousands of pigs, drive them over a cliff and drown them in the sea. We could hardly find a more potent image for the power that mental illness can have over a person and the chaos that can reign within. What *strength* some people have to bear what feels at times like a legion of darkness and chaos dwelling inside of them! That it drives some to suicide ought not to surprise us or lead us to judgment but rather compassion upon compassion for what some must suffer.

So the man is out there chained among the tombs and who should arrive from across the sea, but Jesus. And Jesus sees the man, he *notices* him, and with a heart not full of fear and judgment but full of compassion he makes a beeline for the tombs and asks the man “what is your name?” The man responds “I am legion”. Sadly, he names himself by the condition he has, defines himself not by who he is, but by his sickness.

It is a danger in our now having names and titles for these disorders that we define ourselves or the people around us by them – he is depressed, she is bi-polar, she is an anorexic. There is something – and I'm not sure exactly what it is, but something - about the illnesses of the mind that more readily lead to a value judgment about the person who is ill even though a mental disorder has no more to do with the

essence of a person than diabetes or cancer does. A person no matter what illness or sickness is above all else a sanctified living soul, a child of God, a bearer of God's image. If Jesus teaches us anything in the gospels, it is this lesson – Gerasene Demoniac, woman with a flow of blood, epileptic boy, prostitute, tax collector – we have labels and judgment for them, while Jesus has a place in his heart for them as the beloved souls of God that they are. And it's that power of Jesus' clarity and compassion, his capacity to see through the illness and to the heart and soul of the man from Gerasa that leads to his being restored.

The near miraculous power of restoration for many a person with mental illness in the modern day often lies with medication which can simply help the brain function better. The men and women who have done the cognitive scientific work to develop this over the last decades were also able to look beyond the illness and work to recover the healthy living soul beneath the disorder. Praise God for their work and what can at times feel like a miraculous result! But that restoring of the mind's function is only part of the need and only part of the process as the end of our story reveals.

The man who was chained among the tombs is released from his oppressive illness through Jesus' love and when the town's people arrive they witness the man sitting at Jesus' feet, no longer naked and in his right mind. Their response is one of anger and fear, anger at the loss of their livestock and fear at the profound power that Jesus was wielding to heal this sick man. This response. Without any rejoicing in the man's restoration!

The man begs to come with Jesus, and you can understand why. But Jesus sends him back to be among his people. The physical healing

of his mind was one level of restoration that Jesus effected, but the greater restoration is the man returned into his community where he can become whole again with his people. Jesus never heals to show people how great and amazing he is or simply to make their lives easier, he heals people in order to effect a greater change, to demonstrate through the healing work of his life what God wants for us in our lives – a journey to wholeness inside and out.

I am tempted to say that that transition of the man from out of his mind among the tombs back into life in his town was no simple or easy thing. Likely he would need to learn to live again among his people, to work at restoring relationships that were hurt and build the trust that was damaged as a result of his illness. It wasn't his fault that he became ill, but the work of reconciliation would likely still need to take place. And this work is a lifetime's work and not just for the mentally ill but for all of us. For the truth of the matter is that none of us live completely healthy lives and we all have degrees of ill-health in the way we act and relate in the world no matter how hard we work at it and no matter what medications we take to enhance our behavior. The only thing that does transcend our ill-health is love and as much as we participate with one another in the flow and exchange of love the better we all are for it.

One thing that I have been struck and moved by in my readings and conversations of late centering on mental illness is the remarkable sacrificial love that spouses and parents and siblings and children extend to those who are suffering with mental illness. That is the remarkable presence of the Divine that shines through the brokenness of our lives, that despite the effect that mental illness can have on those surrounding the sick person, that love still forever rises and can hold

back the tide of chaos and pain that seek to rule the day.... And if our loved one doesn't make it through, then the promise is that love is what awaits them on the other side of the veil.

I read the book that the Ruth Group read recently called The Unquiet Mind, where the author Kay Jamison offers a riveting account of her manic and depressive episodes and her profound struggle with medications taken to address her condition. I'd like to read a couple of paragraphs that come at the end of the book. She says this:

We all build internal sea walls to keep at bay the sadness of life and the often overwhelming forces within our minds. In whatever ways we do this – through love, work, family, faith, friends...– we build these walls, stone by stone, over a lifetime. One of the most difficult problems is to construct these barriers of such a height and strength that one has a true harbor, a sanctuary away from the crippling turmoil and pain, but yet low enough and permeable enough, to let in fresh sea-water....For someone with my cast of mind and mood, medication is an integral element of this wall: without it, ... I would unquestionably be dead or insane.

But love is, to me, the ultimately more extraordinary part of the breakwater wall: it helps to shut out the terror and awfulness, while, at the same time allowing in life and beauty and vitality. When I first thought of writing this book, I conceived of it as a book about an illness of moods in the context of an individual life. As I have written it, however, it has somehow turned out to be very much a book about love as well: love as sustainer, as renewer, and as protector. After each seeming death within my mind or heart, love has returned to re-create hope and restore life.

Love is what heals and sustains and renews us day by day. It is not a passive energy that we have to conjure up in ourselves, it is an active presence and force in this world that makes a beeline to where we live amid the tombs, breaks the chains, and invites us to live again. Whether we are struggling with a mental illness or love someone who is, let us never forget the power and simplicity of acts of love and kindness, patience and compassion that can in the end make all the difference. Amen.