Jesus, Friend of…the Mentally Ill
Mark 5:1-20
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My family and I spent eight years in the Chicago area, and we learned fairly quickly that, unlike most places that have four seasons, Chicago only has two: summer and construction season. And summer only lasts about six weeks. In contrast, winter in Chicago lasts about 14 months. During that time, local grocery stores put a picture of the sun on milk cartons because it goes missing for so long. Winters in Chicago were full of a lot of dark days.

But as we all know, we can experience dark days even when it's bright outside, and no amount of summer sunshine can drive that darkness away. We may even know what it feels like to have a shadow cast constantly over our lives, to feel the bleakness of anxiety or depression. As we continue our sermon series on the people with whom Jesus was friends, we look today and those Jesus encountered who were fighting their own demons, literally or figuratively.

The man in our story today is the most vivid example of this. He's known as the Gerasene demoniac because the story tells us that he was possessed by demons. He has been restrained with shackles, banished to live in the tombs, resigned to howling like an animal and engaging in self-harm. Back in Jesus' day, that was demon possession. In today's more enlightened society, we would say this man has a mental illness. And that diagnosis would be hung like an albatross around his neck.

Mental illness is one of the most stigmatized conditions in our country today. One of the reasons for this is our general ignorance about what constitutes mental illness. For a lot of us, we picture a person with a mental illness looking like this man, hair all wild, foaming at the mouth, talking to themselves. In reality, mental illness is far more insidious and far more prevalent. According to statistics provided by NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in four adults, 61.5 million Americans, experience mental illness in a given year. One in 17 – 13.6 million of us – live with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder. Approximately 20 percent of youth ages 13 to 18 experience severe mental disorders in a given year. There are a lot more people wrestling with demons than you might imagine.

And yet, having a mental illness is a severe social taboo in our society, which assigns worth to people who "have it all together." Here's what I mean. I had a doctor's appointment last week. I had a question about one of my medications, so I made an appointment and spent some time with my doctor. Thursday, I had a dentist's appointment to get my teeth cleaned. The hygienist used a water scaler; it felt like I was getting my teeth power-washed. Every once in a while, I see a spiritual director. During our hour together, she helps me focus on my spiritual growth and development. Those appointments are important to me.

Did any of that make you uncomfortable? Did you think, "Kory is seeing a doctor! Is he OK?" "He saw a dentist? Do you think he might have…gingivitis?" No! Those are very normal, even expected, things to do. But what if I had told you that every two weeks, I see a therapist? How would you have reacted to that? "Kory's seeing a therapist? Oh my. Do you think…is he…" I'm not ashamed to say I do see a therapist every two weeks, and he is as important to my health as my doctor and dentist and spiritual director. So why do we tense up a bit when someone talks about seeing a therapist?

This begins to get at the stigma around mental illness. It's not acceptable in our society. If I told you today that I had been diagnosed with cancer, there would be fourteen tuna casseroles at our house by dinner time. But if I told you today that I had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, you might start wondering if I was fit to be your minister. Now, I can tell you that I have not been diagnosed with a mental illness…but what if I was?

That's one of the issues we deal with in our world today with mental illness. We stigmatize it and the people who suffer from it. For those with several mental illnesses, we banish them to the tombs of our society, which used to be places like Eastern State Hospital, but today is more likely to be either prison or the streets. People not in their right mind are not considered contributing members of society, so we find ways to hide them away, to push them to the outskirts of society, to keep them out of sight so they don't disturb our peace.

That may be a convenient way to deal with mental illness, but it's not a Christ-like one. Based on NAMI's stats, a fourth of us present today deal with some form of mental illness. And, if we want to be brutally honest, none of us are in our right minds. I know most of you pretty well and I can confirm that. In reality, we all struggle with the dark clouds that hang over us, the challenges life throws at us, the hopelessness and despair fueled by the evening news. For some of us, those feelings are situational, but for others, because of chemical imbalances in our brains, they are pervasive, a demon dealt with daily.

Which means that those who struggle with mental illness can't do what most people think they should do, which is "just snap out of it," as if mental illness is a sign of weakness. "Turn that frown upside down!" Easier said than done when your brain is your own worst enemy. And churches aren't always safe spaces to be vulnerable about mental illness. According to a recent survey by LifeWay Research, a third of Americans – and nearly half of evangelical Christians – believe prayer and Bible study alone can overcome serious mental illness.

If Jesus was willing to spend time with the mentally ill, to talk with them, to treat them like human beings, then as followers of Christ, we should strive to do the same. It starts by destigmatizing mental illness in our society. I had one person tell me, "So many people are willing to post on social media that they're going to the gym, but no one posts, 'On my way to my therapist!'" And yet, both are important forms of self-care. Destigmatizing mental illness means not judging those who suffer from it, but to see them as human beings with an illness in the most clinical definition of that word. As an organ in our body, the brain can get sick just like other parts can.

Another way we as Christians can humanize people with mental illness is to advocate for their proper care and treatment. They should have access to quality healthcare just like the rest of us, and yet it is often people with mental illness who are the most economically vulnerable in our society, specifically because of the consequences of their mental illness. It's a spiral out of which no one can escape without help. And we are the helpers.

A great example of this exists right here in our own community. In 2014, Lexington established the Mental Health Court as a part of the judicial system. At the time it was launched, Mayor Jim Gray said, "This program is about getting people off the streets and into the treatment they need to lead productive lives instead of continuing to cycle through our criminal justice system. Mental Health Court will improve the lives of its participants and public safety in Lexington and have the added benefit of saving taxpayer money." Statistics show that 43% of the referrals to the Mental Health Court are homeless and 66% also deal with substance abuse. The latest information says the court has worked with 80 individuals, providing them with treatment and recovery options instead of jail time.

In order to befriend those who suffer mental illness, we have to be able to move beyond the stigma and stereotypes to see them as flawed human beings. They didn't choose to be sick, any more than someone would choose to have cancer. They can't will themselves out of it. They need a compassionate, caring hand, someone to walk through the dark valleys with them, someone who can look them in the eye and remind them of their dignity as a child of God. When Jesus does this with the demoniac, his demons flee and he is restored to his right mind.

That doesn't mean we have the power to cure them of their disease, but we might be able to heal them of the pain inflicted upon them by society. At my last church in Chicago, we had a frequent visitor during the week named Jim. Jim would stop by every few weeks looking for some help. Jim would plop down in my office, set aside his raggedy backpack, and launch into some wild story about how he lost his wallet or his car was stolen. Listening to Jim was like riding a roller-coaster. His mood would go up, then down, then twist around in knots. I don't know Jim's diagnosis, but I knew he was ill.

One day, Jim showed up again looking for help. I invited him into my office and said, "Jim, my friend, what can I do for you today?" He paused a few moments and then started crying. Not like quiet sobs, but an ugly cry. I handed him a few Kleenex and waited until he caught his breath. When he did, he looked at me said, "I don't remember the last time someone called me a 'friend'."

For those with mental illness, there are very few safe spaces in their lives. They live among the tombs in our society, banished to the outskirts where "normal" people don't have to deal with them. The church should be a safe space for all of us, including those of us who struggle with demons. Because it is here that we encounter the living Christ, who can speak a word of compassion, who can look us in the eye and remind us that his death wasn't just for those of us who have it all together, if such a person even exists.

In Isaiah 43, God says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." When our minds are flooded with thoughts of despair, when we feel like we are drowning in our depression, God promises to be with us. If you suffer from a mental illness, you are not alone. You are safe here. All of us are called to reach out a healing hand toward those among us who suffer. May we follow Jesus' lead in how we see and treat those with mental illness. They are not freaks to be banished to the tombs; they are our friends.