

January 31, 2021

**“Holey, Wholly, Holy”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake
Health & Human Services Sunday**

Scripture Readings:

Psalm 111

Praise the Lord!

*I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.*

Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

*Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.*

*He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.*

He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.

*He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.*

The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

*They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.*

He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant for ever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.*

His praise endures for ever.

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Reflection “Holey, Wholly, Holy”

Health and Human services is an umbrella term that is about a lot more than mental health but I would like to focus a little on that today. This passage in Mark introduces Jesus as the new teacher in town. He is teaching new material that no one has ever heard and they like it, they like it a lot. And then suddenly we get introduced to Jesus as healer.

Mark uses the unnamed man with an unclean spirit as a literary device to introduce Jesus as healer and demon whisperer. I think it was the intention of Mark to show to his readers that all the other worldly beings, the unseen forces of the universe all knew that Jesus is the Messiah.

It gave Jesus some authority that the demon that possessed the unclean man had this knowledge and was afraid of him. This is an ancient way of thinking of the three-tiered universe, Heaven, Hell, and Earth. In this passage we see that Jesus is well known in 2 of 3 realms and on his way to being known in the third.

But here’s what happened, people with some forms of mental illness were now seen as demon possessed, especially schizophrenics. There was already a stigma on mental illness and this did not help it any.

A quick search on the internet reveals that there is plenty of that out there still. That you just have to pray hard enough, believe hard enough, and Jesus will rid you of the demons that possess you whether it is addiction, depression, or schizophrenia. These are not things you can just pray away.

I was particularly moved by one article that I read by Emily Kathleen Greer. She wrote in contradiction to that:

“I desperately hoped that my mental illness would go away once I fully gave my life to Christ, but it didn’t happen that way. Sometimes my heart is heavy and my heart hurts, but that doesn’t mean that God isn’t at work in my life. Some days my head knows something my heart doesn’t, and those are the days I spend in bed.”

In this article we see the way the author relies on God and that is a big part of her coping and comfort from her depression but she goes on to talk about all the help she has had from therapy, medication, and friends. God gave her the courage and strength to reach out for help. *Our job as people, as a community, as a nation, and as a church is to make sure when people reach out that we can reach back.*

So even though we know God loves and accepts us with our holes and all, many still look at mental illness through that xenophobic lens. I think some of that fear of others different from us comes from the need to distance ourselves from our own fears. Our fears that that could be any one of us.

Some 20 plus years ago while I was still in training I was asked to lead a spirituality groups in the locked “Psyche” ward at a major hospital in St. Louis. I remember how uncomfortable, how afraid I was. I think deep down why I was afraid was that I knew that if my trouble with addiction hadn’t gone into remission, if therapy hadn’t worked to help heal some of my wounds, if medication hadn’t worked sufficiently during my “dark nights of the soul”, then I could have been any one of the people I was being asked to serve.

One in five adults struggles with mental health, one in four homes is affected by it. That number is increasing and more and more teens are affected by it.

That means that some of you have had to deal with mental health issues in yourself or someone you love. My impulse in that unit was to look for how could we “fix them”. Like somehow they just weren’t participating in their treatment enough or non-compliant enough with their medications, or on the wrong medication, etc... that there just had to be a solution.

I had a wise supervisor gently call me out on this, about how I saw them all as broken and in need of fixing but that that left God out of the equation. He told me that next time I went to the ward to remind myself before I entered that I was entering a Holy place.

A place where God’s vulnerable resided, people all close to God’s heart. He suggested perhaps they didn’t need fixing but society did. That because they didn’t behave the way humanity thought they should behave their suffering was made even worse.

That their pain, suffering and crisis were exacerbated when they tried to fit their round selves into the square holes of society. He said people would judge them relentlessly, thinking if they could just count their blessings, look on the bright side, buck up, and think positively then they wouldn’t be stuck in such a negative emotional state.

He taught me that I could not judge another human being by my own inner landscape. Like the prophet Isaiah said when we tried to think as God. “My thoughts are not your thoughts”. Their thoughts were not my thoughts. That no two people are the same and what might work for me to talk myself out of a bad space could just heap more coals on the heads of the people I was trying to help.

He said that they had enough judgment, enough people trying to fix them, but they didn’t have enough people to just show them compassion, kindness, acceptance and the grace and love of God. He said those were the things that would help them feel like whole human beings again. Shalom in its original, most basic, Hebrew meaning means whole. Like the stones that were used to build the first altars were whole stones, one of it’s more evolved meanings is peace.

How do we help each other and the people in our lives find peace and wholeness even in their struggles with their mental health? Most of us really have to change the way we think and help educate others to erase the stigma of mental health issues.

What's odd is that we don't do this with other dis-ease. We don't say to the diabetic, "just pray a little harder and you'll be healed," or "buck up life without pie will be fine," or judge a person with heart trouble for not being able to think themselves into a healthier place.

And the worst of it as Charles Spurgeon once said, "The mind can descend far lower than the body, for in it there are bottomless pits. The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul can bleed in ten thousand ways, and die over and over again each hour." Mental illness is not a new phenomenon.

It's interesting that further along in Mark we see the powers that be and Jesus's family think Jesus himself is possessed. His family actually does a kind of "intervention" on him. In the third chapter of Mark it reads: "And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for people were saying, "He is beside himself". And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Be-el'zebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons". And don't get me started on what people thought of all the prophets.

What we see in this is that there is indeed something holy about those people who see the world differently and take us on that journey with them. And there is something holy about people who are moved by compassion to help care for those that are suffering knowing that God is invested in easing the suffering of the world.

Maybe Jesus treated them like they were possessed but he still definitely deemed that they all were worthy of healing.

We also know there is a strong connection between genius, creativity and mental illness, through the likes of Vincent van Gough, Virginia Wolf, Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Allen Poe and many others.

Today there is growing evidence that there truly is a thin line between genius and insanity. Scientists are finding genes that show how closely linked the two can be. Imagine life and culture without the contributions of unstable geniuses. Something to think about

I am not saying that we enable people with problematic, unhealthy behaviors. Hurt people can hurt people and they have to be willing to get the help they need. I'm just saying we can offer them love and acceptance on their journey.

We are a church committed to inclusivity. What does that look like when it comes to mental health? Does that mean we try and strike a pose of non judgment when someone in church is not able to be silent during the sermon, like this unclean spirit interrupted Jesus? Does it mean we keep giving to local charities and to CHHSM and OCWM?

Does it mean that we create a safe place for all of us to own our struggles with each other, I think you all have done that already in large part, but do we do it with more intentionality? So if one of you feels depressed you feel free to say it out loud so that we can pray for you, companion with you as you struggle?

I'd like us to think about this, talk about it and make sure it is how we understand ourselves and our commitment to being an inclusive church, especially now when the isolation we have faced with this virus has exacerbated so many underlying struggles.

Please don't hesitate to give me a call if you or someone you care about is struggling. I will listen, and if I can't help we can figure out who can together. Shalom to you all. AMEN

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