

Gerasene Demoniac Read: Mark 5:1-20, February 9, 2020

What a strange story! Have you heard it before?

Here we find the scariest description of someone who is “out of their mind”

Here we find animals featured that were unclean to any Jew and are featured nowhere else in the bible, domestic pigs.

The pigs become mad and the madman becomes healthy and calm.

What do we make of it?

Some recent scholars say the true meaning of the story could only be understood by First Century Jews.

They say the story shows a man who got mad from trauma induced by the Roman military and its Legions.(the demon says “my name is legion”, get it?) They say that a wild boar was the insignia on the flag of the Roman cohort stationed in Syria Palestine at the time, and that Jesus sends the demon where it belongs, into “those pigs” . The fact that the “pigs” self destruct would have brought comical relief to the Jewish peasants who suffered so much under the Roman military.

In earlier times the puzzle seemed to have been around how and if this story could have ever happened.

Thomas Henry Huxley declared 180 years ago that the faithful could not have it both ways. Either the Evangelists were fabricating a story when they spoke of Jesus casting out devils and permitting them to enter a herd of swine, who immediately plunged into the sea, or Jesus had wantonly destroyed the property of others, which surely he would not do.

An audience of American hog farmers apparently complained to their minister when he preached on this text saying pigs can swim and surely would not have stupidly drowned themselves.

And then other scholars have pointed out that at the least Mark got his geography wrong...because the country of the Gerasenes has no lake.

O dear. We read this and say “what the heck is this story supposed to mean for us?”

And yet,among all the strange elements there is something familiar to us .

Our entry into this strange story is the mentally disturbed person at the centre of it.

The state of the man, who is “possessed” is familiar to us.

“Possessed” that is he is no longer his normal self. He behaves in a way that is not him. He is under the influence of other powers or forces.

You see it when someone is under the influence of alcohol or drugs...not a nice picture. We try to isolate the person, put them to bed to sleep it off, or in a serious delirium call 911 and get them into a supervised withdrawal place.

Mental illness is another situation where we encounter such a scary scenario.

I remember how terrifying it was when a friend of mine went into a schizophrenic episode from normal to completely “possessed” in a matter of hours. It was terrifying as he slid

into a state where he did not recognize anything or anyone around him any more. When he thought that we, his friends, were his enemies, he became dangerous for us. Then there is the self harming behaviour some of us recognize. Parents of severely depressed children are often helpless when confronted with locked doors, isolating behaviour and outbursts of self harming like cutting themselves. The man in Gerasa hurt and cut himself with stones.

Then we recognize in the man symptoms of people who suffer from "Multiple personality disorder". They will not know who "they" are anymore. They may speak in the way the man in Gerasa spoke, sometimes in "we" and "they", sometimes in "I" -

You may also think of the Lionel Desmond inquiry, which is happening right now, the Afghanistan veteran who suffered from severe Post Traumatic stress and depression and in the end shot 3 beloved family members and himself. How could one not call the state he was in as one of "possession"?

I suppose they are still trying to determine to what extent the military experience and trauma of war caused the behaviour that led him to kill his loved ones. It strikes me that the man in Gerasa calls his demon "Legion" a military term. Was he too possessed by war memories?

We know that the Roman military was a brutal force in Jesus' time. Any inkling of revolt was brutally cut down. Had he seen atrocities? Had he been forced to commit atrocities?

The man who lives completely isolated from others, who could not be contained or treated, who suffered terribly, inflicted harm on himself and was a danger to others. He is one of us. We know him, or know of him.

The brain is a wonderfully complex but fragile organ, the human mind is still in many ways a mystery to us. But to be deeply affected by the violence of the world is human. To go "mad" because of traumatic events is human. A "mad" person among us disrupts the social fabric of the village or family around them. But the connection between mental illness and social disruption works the other way round as well. When things are wrong with society, psychological problems increase and intensify. The society Jesus was living in was feverish, traumatized, divided. No wonder someone would lose his mind.

Jesus goes to him. He is not afraid. He has a calm that is mesmerizing.

He is intent on helping free that man from his trauma. And he is able.

In sending the illness into the pigs, turning them wild, he sends the trauma back to where it most likely came from, the Roman Legion that had the boar on its flag. This was the 10th Legion Fretensis, which was stationed in Judea to suppress the Jewish revolts, and was instrumental in the war which destroyed Jerusalem and its inhabitants in the year 70.

After the pigs have self destructed the man comes back "to his right mind". It seems that he has successfully transitioned in his mind from a severe trauma into the present.

But what now? And here the story takes us into the next stage of healing, which involves the entire community and especially his friends.

The man wants to stay with Jesus. Stay with the one who has control over his demons. That would be safe.

He is afraid of going back into society it seems. But Jesus won't have it. Jesus pushes him further. Go to your people, to your friends and share the good news with them says Jesus.

So he goes.

I wonder how he was received. So much would depend on that, wouldn't it? Will Jesus' healing take root and be lasting, or not?

His homecoming challenges his people as much as it challenges him. How would they behave towards him?.....Think about that for a moment.... Did they keep their distance for fear that an episode would reoccur? Did he have forever that stigma attached that people would whisper to one another "this is the one who used to live among the tombs.."

What would have helped the man the most? I imagine open and non judgmental conversation about his illness and how he was coping, but did they do this in 1st century Palestine?

Do we even do this in 21st century Nova Scotia? Much has changed for the better. For too long we interpreted mental illness as the result of a personal slacking off , or even as a result of sin.

Today we know much more about the human brain. We know that diseases of the brain result not from sin, but from a complex web of causes. Mental illness can come from a traumatic experience, it can be hereditary. It can be the degradation of the environment, the fast pace of change in all aspects of life, and other causes.

The medical profession is doing much to lift the stigma.

Popular campaigns such as Bell lets Talk Day are helping a lot to educate ourselves.

But we are lacking psychologists and psychiatrists in our healthcare system and wait times are long. All the more important are the small things we can all do, by paying attention, using kind language and offering a listening ear to what ails the other person .

What happened to my friend? Like the man of Gerasa, his troubled mind calmed eventually as well. After a long hospital stay eventually we talked about what happened. Though schizophrenia can not be cured his episodes got fewer and fewer. With medication and therapy. But he suffered a lot. Loosing entire semesters at university.. Loosing friends who wanted more lighthearted relationships .Watching his family worry and hover over his every move. Mental illness can be harder than physical illness on a person and the family.

In Canada, US, the Western World we are currently in an epidemic of depression.

Depression is internalized anger, say many psychologists. And there is plenty of reason for anger: Our social web has become weak, classic support structures are not there any more, people are isolated and have great difficulty keeping pace with the constant changes of technology imposed on us. On top we are aware of seemingly insurmountable problems with our planet, climate, corporate power, and social injustice.

One in 5 Canadians will experience a mental illness this year. That would be at least 10 out of 50 here. Health Canada says one in 3 will or has experienced a mental illness in their lifetime. Thats 20 out of 60 at worship. Most likely more of us, because we are in need of God's love and healing and we know it. If you are one of one in 5 or one in 3 so am I. Those of you who were here in 2015 will remember my medical leave after brain injury, which lead to huge anxiety and ultimately severe depression, but also to recovery and much enjoyment of life and ministry now.

Rev. Dr. Sarah Griffith Lund an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ says:" Despite how common depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges are, in the church we are often silent about this kind of suffering. Mental Illness is known in the church as the "non-casserole" disease. "

But lets remind ourselves how Jesus approached the terrifying and terrible man in the tombs?

We are not alone.

If you are hearing or reading this and find all this is a bit too close to home, please be not ashamed.

You are a beloved son or daughter of God, Jesus would have seen you there by the wayside in the 1st century, and walked right over to you. You are not alone.

Today, in the 21st century, we dont have his instant cures to administer but we have Jesus' unconditional love to share.

I have heard from persons suffering from depression that church people try too hard to look good. The one with a mental health problem feels ostracized because the good church people look like they have it all together. Is this why we hesitate to come when we are not well ? Or is it the fear of having to answer questions? To be probed? What do you think about that? Do we know enough of one another to know when offering casseroles or going for coffee might be helpful? And if not, what could we do so we can support one another more kindly?

When we talk about becoming an affirming church, we also talk about becoming a church where we affirm one another in our mental illnesses. No one should be ashamed to be their wounded self.

We hold a candle for one another and we are determined to remind you that these wounds of the mind are not your fault, and that you are loved as you are.

In a moment we will say together "We are not alone...."

may we make our church and our small community evermore so that no one walks alone.