

## MENTAL HEALTH & THE CHURCH

THESIS: WE WHO FOLLOW JESUS MUST FIND WAYS TO GO WHERE JESUS WENT—INCLUDING TO PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM MENTAL ILLNESS.

There are times when it's difficult to be a Christian—people who try to follow Jesus which includes loving one another. One reason for the difficulty is the anxiety we experience just coping with day-to-life--- driving on the freeways, the reality that huge numbers of people lose jobs at a moments notice, the price of housing and the threat of violence on our streets, in our schools and even in our workplaces.

Sometimes, even when we're young and fairly resilient, we don't always want to take the risk the of being a "Good Samaritan." Who knows what might happen? We walk away thinking, "I can't get involved. Let someone else deal with the problem."

Then we run into someone who acts unpredictably. It doesn't matter whether he or she is on drugs, off of their medications or mentally ill. We just know that it's beyond our ability to help this person at this moment in time. We are overwhelmed. It's happened to me several times. In my first year of seminary I volunteered for to be a student chaplain in a psychiatric hospital. During a tour of the hospital, we entered a locked ward for people with bipolar disorder: people who were alternately manic & depressed. The moment I entered the ward I wanted to run for the door. As I came into the ward several patients, most of them quite manic or excited, surrounded me. They spoke rapidly, and some were even touching me. No one was actually threatening me. Yet, I could feel the sweat running down my back as the instructor and the rest of the group headed for the door.

At that moment I didn't know what to do or say. In fact, my anxiety was rapidly turning to fear. I looked over at t he nursing staff, and no one seemed upset, but I certainly was. It never occurred to me to think about Psalm 23 or 91 or Mark 5. I was totally unaware of God's presence with all of us for those 2-3 minutes. I was more concerned about myself than about what God needed from me.

My fear, at that time and place was more powerful than my trust in God's promises. I did not recall how my wife Jane, a retired nurse, told me many years ago that fear was what drove much of how we react to people who seem to be different from us. She was right.

The lesson that I learned that day was that I didn't want to cope with rapid change or other threats that emerge unexpectedly. Perhaps you know what that's like. It seems to be a problem even for entire congregations as well as individuals within that congregation.

Still, as the Gospels make clear, followers of Jesus Christ are called by God to get involved where others need us even if we don't want to help them. In today's reading from Mark 5:1-20 Jesus entered a situation where a man was out of control. As Mark told the story, the man was not what most would consider "normal." He could not be restrained even by chains. It isn't stated, but it seems to be implied that the people who lived in the region of the "Gerasenes" ostracized him—drove him out of their towns. He was forced to live amongst the tombs. "Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones." (Mk. 5:5) I worked for years with people who experienced many of these fears that go with not being accepted by their communities or even their families. They weren't even sure that they trusted God. I worked as a chaplain to veterans of our military forces.

What do we make of this story? Do we assume that it's just a miracle story? Is it meant to teach us to stay away from people who might be a danger to us—i.e. let God deal with them? Do we dismiss the story because, "everyone knows" that there is no such thing as demons?

We need to step back from all of this anxiety and ask how the text from Mark 5 can help us to understand our anxiety and even fear. Jesus was not simply performing a miracle. Jesus was confronting a host of evil forces. When he asked the man what his name was, he was talking to the demonic forces that had taken control of this man. The man's answer, "My name is Legion . . .for we are many," is a word picture for being overwhelmed by forces that he could neither understand nor control.

It's quite likely that no one in Jesus' day had a real grasp of what either evil or mental illness could do to a person. Gradually, they assigned blame for various behaviors either to sin or to the forces that led them to sin. Mental illness became one more example of how the evil in the world caused havoc in people's lives.

Over the last century, thanks to the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung as well as many other physicians and other researchers, we now have a much different understanding of mental illness. While evil is still a reality in this world, we now realize that conditions of the mind can be caused by everything from stress to drugs to violence experienced in childhood, etc.

While the research on mental health continues, we need ways now to cope with our stressors. We need guidance about responding to people with whom we live, work or worship who are mentally ill. We need ways that are grounded in our faith in Jesus Christ. So how do we deal with someone with a mental illness who acts out in Church? Without God's grace, most of us would either ignore the behavior or expect the pastor to deal with it. We are so afraid of people living with mental illness that we avoid even speaking to them.

Well, if you need to put a face on mental illness, look at mine. I live with two psychiatric diagnoses: PTSD and depression. Most of the time my medications help me to stay in control and function fairly well. Sometimes, however, I reach the limits of what I can handle at that moment. So I go for a walk, I pray and I ask for help. I pray every day for grace to cope with my illnesses by being as loving as I can.

So How can we help mentally ill people from feeling like they/we need to live outside of town—that without the support of a church family? We can begin by inviting and welcoming them/us to worship and share our fellowship as Christians. I come here because I know that this is a place where I can find a congregation of Christian believers. We help each other to remember that we are all members of the family of God “Just as We Are.” In that family we all suffer--perhaps not from PTSD, but we all suffer. As St. Paul wrote, we “need to bear each other's burdens.” (Gal. 6:2) To do so requires community.

Finally, it's important to ask where to begin learning how to respond to those living with mental illness. One important step is to stop referring to people with the name of the disease they have. So, a person with schizophrenia is not simply labeled a "Schizophrenic" as if that is all there is to her or his life. He or she is a person living with schizophrenia. A person who is living with depression is not simply depressed. They are doing their best to live their lives while coping with their mental illness. Changing how we speak about people eventually changes how we think about them. That, in turn, opens the door to changing how we react to all people.

What more can we do to bring God's love to those of us who suffer from mental health problems? We can continue to learn more about mental health issues and needs. We can also read about healing in the Bible. We can read about how Jesus dealt with people labeled as "Demoniacs" as well as those with other conditions. These stories remind us that God is stronger than any force of evil, disease, genetics or any social condition that hinders our growth in grace.

We can lay the groundwork by praying in church and privately for those of us living with mental illnesses. If we want to preserve their privacy, we can ask for ongoing prayer without naming the person—just their condition. If we ourselves live with mental illness we might acknowledge that and ask for others we trust to pray for us.

If we do nothing, we miss the opportunity to help those of us who feel unwelcome in the Church because of our mental health needs. If we act proactively to welcome mentally ill people, we become a congregation that looks for new ways to affirm and love all of God's people just as they are. We do this whatever stress it may cause us. But we do it together as a family—the family of God! God's people deserve no less—regardless of the state of our minds, bodies or spirits. Amen.