

“Grace for the Legions In and Among Us”

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6-23-19

Based upon Psalm 40:1-3; Luke 8:26-39

A friend of mine, Sarah Hope Lincoln, is a clinical psychologist with special training in adolescent schizophrenia, who teaches at Case Western Reserve in Ohio. When she was doing her doctoral work at a VA hospital, she was required to step into the shoes of her patients, by experiencing a clinically manufactured “day-in-the-life of someone with schizophrenia.” She was given a recording of voices which she had to have playing in her ears continuously, that was made by someone who heard voices and knew what it was like. “Stink, stink, stink,” one voice said. Another called her “stupid” and “worthless” and questioned her every move: “You can’t do this. Who do you think you are?” One was constantly telling her things to do: “Touch that!” “Go there!” “Don’t look!” “Stop!” While she listened to the recording, she was charged with going through the ordinary day of an intern at the hospital, including processing patients, doing rounds, filling out paperwork, etc. At first, Sarah Hope said she could will herself to ignore the ruckus they were making, or to hear their barbs as silly or ridiculous. But as the day wore on, she became more and more worn down by the voices, which stopped and started at irregular intervals, so she always was taken by surprise. She found herself stopping instantly on command in the hallway, and arguing in her head with the voice that said she was unworthy. Finally, when she was filling out admissions paperwork, she couldn’t take it anymore, and without thinking about the consequences, started talking back at them – out loud. That was when the other people in the room, who were not a part of the experiment and didn’t know that she was listening to voices and not music, began to look at her strangely and to distance themselves from her. That was also when she really felt what it was like to have schizophrenia.

I don’t know if the man forever known as the “Gerasene demoniac” in Scripture suffered from schizophrenia or something else. In Jesus’ day, all unexplainable health issues were attributed to demons. So, he may have had Multiple Personality Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, or Tourette Syndrome. He may have been clinically depressed, suffered from anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress disorder (PTSD), or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He may have been on the autism spectrum or neurologically atypical in some other way. He may even have been possessed by actual demons I suppose, if you believe in such things. But hearing his story reminds me of Sarah Hope’s experience because whatever his underlying condition was, he too was tormented to the degree that he no longer was well-received in polite society. In fact, he had been completely cast out, and was living among the tombs when Jesus and the disciples came across the sea of Galilee to his territory, which was a Gentile territory known as the Decapolis. The man, whom I’ll call “Gary” after his home city since the Bible did not disclose his real name, was about as unclean as you can get, not just according to the laws of good hygiene, but also according to the Law of Moses. Gary was a Gentile; he was naked; and he was living among the dead. He was also so possessed by whatever plagued him that when Jesus asked his name, he couldn’t say, “Gary” or “Joe” or “Fred.” Instead he said “Legion,” for many were the demons which tormented him. A legion was a Roman term for approximately 5,000 troops; that tells you just how overwhelmed the man felt.

Author William Styron knew what it was like to have a legion inside him. When he turned 60, he developed such an extreme form of clinical depression that he had suicidal thoughts and had to be hospitalized for his own safety. Writing about the experience afterwards, in a powerful and important book called Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness, he chaffed at the term “depression,” which he considered to be woefully inadequate to describe the state of his mind. “Depression,” he wrote, “evokes reactions like ‘So what?’ or ‘You’ll pull out of it’ or ‘We all have bad days.’” What he suffered from would have been better described, in his opinion, as a “Brain storm” if that term hadn’t already been preempted to describe positive thoughts. His depression was “a veritable howling tempest in the brain.”¹ It was all-consuming to the degree that everything about himself and his life that was good and wonderful and true, was erased beyond vision and memory. There was no award-winning author left, only pain.

We don’t often talk about mental illnesses like these in the Church, but we should. One in five adults suffers from a mental health condition every year—that’s about 46.6 million people in the United States alone. One in twenty-five, according to NAMI, the National Alliance for Mental Illness, suffers from a mental illness serious enough to interfere substantially with major life activities.² Although schizophrenia is still relatively rare, seven percent of Americans suffer from major depression, which is also the leading cause of disability worldwide. Eighteen percent of Americans or 42 million Americans suffer from anxiety disorders, including panic attacks, PTSD, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and specific phobias. Mental illness fuels the drug addiction epidemic in our country, and fills our prisons. Seventy percent of youth in juvenile justice systems have at least one mental health concern, twenty percent of adult prisoners do. Only forty-one percent of all who suffer from a mental health condition in our country received medical help in the past year, which explains in part the soaring suicide rate in our country, and among teens in Anne Arundel County.

There are a lot of people suffering silently, untreated, and a lot of people being shunned and judged too, because in our country mental illness comes inexplicably and unfairly with a stigma. We do not judge or shame those who have a physical illness such as cancer or Parkinson’s disease, or who need glasses or hearing aids or canes. But to have something wrong with your brain—well a lot of people think that then means something must wrong with you. To many people, unfortunately, it means that you are someone to be feared, or who is unworthy or unacceptable in some way.

The unjust stigma applies to those who were born with atypical neurology as well as to those who suffer from illnesses like depression and anxiety. Individuals who “fall on the autistic spectrum,” who have a sensory processing disorder (SPD), or ADHD are also frequently judged simply for being cognitively different from the majority. This past week Dr. Paul Rimmer, a resident at Cambridge, made this clear in a heart-breaking way when he posted a letter that he wrote to the Dean of the Chapel at King’s College in Cambridge, England, after an incident with his sons. One of his two sons has autism. He took them both to hear Evensong at the King’s

¹ Styron, William, Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 36-38.

² All of the following statistics come from NAMI. [See http://www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org).

College Chapel for Father's Day. The son with autism is nonverbal, and expresses his pleasure and excitement by laughing and calling out. He cannot control this. When he expressed his delight in the Evensong service, the ushers soon came and asked the father and his sons to leave. They said the family was being inconsiderate because tourists came from all over the world to hear the Evensong and the boy was interfering with that.

Rimmer wrote to the Dean, "As a Christian, I believe that worship is primarily intended to glorify God, and may have misinterpreted your Evensong as an actual worship service, at which my son's expressions must surely be pleasing to God, the experience of other worshipers being secondary.... Might I suggest that you place a sign at the front of the chapel, clearly identifying which categories of people are welcome and which are not? I can only imagine how terrible it would be if autistic people, others with disabilities, those with mental illnesses, and people with dementia were all equally welcome to attend Evensong, how this would get in the way of the choir's performance, how it would distract the choristers, and how upsetting seeing these sorts of people at the chapel would be for the tourists who have come such a long way. My son might not be able to talk, but he knows perfectly well what is going on around him. This is not the first time my family has been asked to leave a church on account of his being "too disruptive for other worshipers.... He isn't even ten years old and he knows that he is unwelcome...."³

The Dean of the Chapel responded quickly and with profuse apologies. He said it wasn't at his directive that the ushers removed the family, and asked for a meeting so they could make amends and learn how to do better. But the incident invites all churches, not just King's College Chapel, to revisit their calling and their practices. How should the Church respond to people with atypical neurology, whether developmental or due to illness or injury? I think if we study Jesus' encounter with Gary, the man with a legion of mental troubles, the answer is pretty clear.

Notice how the very first thing that Jesus did was to approach the man, not run from him or judge him. Although it violated all kinds of Laws and social conventions for him to do so, Jesus approached him with the intent of being a source of healing love for the man. The demons sensed this immediately, which is why they begged Jesus not to cast them into "the abyss" and to cast them out into a nearby herd of pigs instead. It's not exactly clear why Jesus listened to them. Perhaps he thought the plan was satisfactory because as a good Jew he saw pigs as unclean animals; perhaps he knew that the pigs would go mad and run into the sea, thereby killing the demons. It was believed in those days that much like the Wicked Witch of the West in The Wizard of Oz, demons could not survive getting wet. Whatever his rationale was for his treatment of the demons and pigs, Jesus treatment of Gary was unambiguously positive. He healed him, restoring him to himself, equipping him to reenter the community, and called him to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles. Jesus never shamed him, ignored him, or distanced himself from him. Jesus saw him as a beloved child of God capable of doing ministry, and treated him accordingly.

³ Rimmer, Paul. "Letter of Apology to King's College Chapel" posted June 17, 2019 7:30 a.m.; https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10113922705553385&set=a.10101053354286485&type=3&eid=ARAVzD9paFGtRHcnW14K5TMsTtCjTJshB9N1_ii6pjH7ySRIPv1lwpuUWA-c9QfiYW3y10-HwCD4mG

This tells us two things. First, if we suffer from any kind of mental illness or atypical neurology ourselves, then we can rest assured that we are beloved to God. There is no need for shame, no need to hide out so Jesus won't see us or know what truly weighs on us. We are safe with God—safe to be vulnerable, safe to be honest about our confusion, compulsions, and pain, safe to be our unique selves. I can't explain why God does not heal everyone with mental illness any more than I can explain why God doesn't heal everyone with physical illness. But I can tell you with confidence grounded in the knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ in stories like this, that God loves everyone who struggles with mental and neurological challenges as much as those who do not. The need for shame before God died on the cross. So, if you are hurting, turn to God. God may not remove all your pain. But God's grace can give you strength in the midst of it, and hope for the future. And on days when you are feeling inadequate because of the judgmentalism of the world, God's love can remind you are worthy and cherished and carry the very image of God within you.

The second thing Jesus' treatment of Gary teaches us is that we, who call ourselves his disciples, must respond to all as Jesus did. We are called to embrace all people with love and understanding, not with judgment and shaming. We are called to welcome people back into community, not drive them from it—which brings me back to the pigs again. When the disciples watched the pigs drown, they would not have blinked because as good Jews the disciples saw the pigs as unclean animals. But we are different. The animal lovers in us cringe at the pigs' senseless destruction, and the workers in us cringe at the harm done to the pigs' keepers too. Thanks to Jesus, the swine herders lost their livelihood that day! And Jesus doesn't even apologize. What about their security and peace?

The story doesn't address any of this adequately. Luke wanted us to focus on Gary being healed, nothing else. But I think it is still valuable for us to recognize from the tension the pigs raise in us the truth that when it comes to the Gospel, what is good news for some, does not always feel like good news for all. The swine herders and the people from the city were afraid of Jesus, not Gary at the end. They wanted Jesus to leave because he was an instrument of change that they didn't like. As the King's College controversy reveals, sometimes we in the Church behave the same way. We know that Jesus loves all people, but we don't really want to welcome all people, not if it is going to have a negative impact on our ability to enjoy Church, or our comfort and sense of security, or our budget. People who make noises in worship, who dress differently, or bathe less frequently make us uncomfortable. Some people even make us afraid. We don't know what to do when people panic, or refuse to be cheered up, or can't make eye contact. We don't know how to talk about PTSD and suicidal thoughts. Here then is the challenge of the story: to accept that the Gospel asks something of us as well as gives something to us. It asks us to step out of our comfort zones, knowing that to love and welcome all as Jesus did, will end up changing us as much as them. We will need to learn, grow, and overcome our fears, putting the needs of the vulnerable over our preferences. We will need to accept the economic impact ourselves or others for doing this. We will need to trust God and each other, instead of trying to control all.

Setting aside for a moment the fact that God asks us to do this whether we like it or not, however, there is an upside for all of us if we do this. When we do Church right, we all benefit mentally and physically. A study done by Duke University showed that people who attend religious services regularly have less anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, lower blood pressure, fewer strokes, and fewer suicides than those who do not. They don't go to church because they are healthier. Church makes them healthier. The study speculated that feeling spiritually supported by a higher power does this, and we know that God is a source of healing.⁴ But I suspect that feeling supported by a loving community is a major factor too. God created this place for our healing as well as our serving. God created this place so that we would be able to be known and loved as we are, not as the world tells us we should be.

“I waited patiently for the Lord,” the psalmist wrote. “He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.” (Ps. 40:1-3). Do not let the world tell you to hide or that you are less worthy or valuable than anyone else. Do not convince yourself that you are all alone or that nothing is more powerful than your pain either. The Church is here; and we are all broken in different ways so you fit right in; and God is here too, for all of us. By God's grace, we can find greater wholeness, hope, and peace together on the solid foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ See Koenig HG; Pargament K; Nielsen J., “*Religious coping and health status in medically ill hospitalized older adults*,” THE JOURNAL OF NERVOUS AND MENTAL DISEASE, Sept. 1998;186(9):513-21, retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9741556>. See also “*Duke Study: Attending Religious Service May Improve Immune Status*,” Duke Health, published October 22, 1997, updated January 20, 2016; retrieved from <https://corporate.dukehealth.org/news-listing/duke-study-attending-religious-service-may-improve-immune-status>; Salerno, Angela, “*Harvard Study: Going to Church Boosts Health*,” THE INSTITUTE FOR NATURAL HEALING, May 29, 2016, <https://www.institutefornaturalhealing.com/2016/05/harvard-study-going-to-church-boosts-health>