

## Highfield Rd Uniting Church

In God is health and wholeness

Mark 5:1 - 15



“He had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he had wrenched apart and the shackles he broke in pieces.” This detailed and evocative story of the healing of a desperate and tortured man was the inspiration for Ched Myers ground-breaking work, *‘Binding the Strong Man - A Political Commentary on Mark.’* Myers saw in this story that the use of the word Legion, and some of the unique verbs in the account of the pigs running off the cliff, showed an early church parable on the Roman occupation, and the brutal treatment of the Palestinian population. But that is just one approach to this complex story.

“I feel sorry for the swineherd and the pigs, what did they do to deserve this?” Oh, how I wish we could tell a version of this story without the massive distraction of the pigs. I know they appear in the story to make it clear to the reader that this is not in Jewish territory, but for many modern readers, they drag attention away, not just from this man and his suffering, but away from Jesus. There is much more here in this complex story.

The mention of demons leads some modern readers to reject the story and say, “He’s not possessed, he has a mental illness.” Well, what if we stop and focus there? Read this story as an account of Jesus being confronted by someone suffering from mental illness?

Attacks of rage and breaking through restraints, obsession with tombs and death, howling and crying out, self-harm. And then, at the end, sitting clothed and in his right mind. How could you read this as anything other than a story about mental illness? And you might say, “So what? We’re not Jesus, we can’t just command someone to be well, or exercise some divine power. Well, there are two very important messages for us when this story is read through the lens of mental health. Important points, not just advice about how to be with someone with mental illness, but also important points for ourselves in confronting and maintaining our own mental health:

One, name the demons.

Two, treat the person and the mental illness separately.

Rejecting mention of demons as superstition or nonsense ignores that, while the metaphysical concept may not be supportable, the language is in our culture and has some power and relevance. And the old superstition that naming the demon gives you power over it is real; having a name, a diagnosis, a reason for why you are not well means you have a strategy, a treatment, and some power to restore wellness and wholeness. You are not just tired, unable to perform normal duties,

or unexpectedly emotional, you may have mild depression. Name the demon! You may be angry all the time, and taking it out on family and friends; look deeper, why are you angry? Name the demon! When Jesus asked, "What is your name?" it wasn't just an old superstition of having power over a demon, it was about inviting the man to look deeper at his condition and admit, "This is not me, I need help. My name is Legion." We don't have anywhere near enough information to start reflecting on a psychological diagnosis, like Multiple Personality Disorder or some form of Schizophrenia. It is enough that Jesus invited him to identify what was going on. Name the demon!

It is unfortunate that Mark ends the story by calling the man a demoniac, because the heart of the story is the powerful lesson of separating the sufferer and the condition. Jesus deals with a man with an unclean spirit, not an unclean man. You are not depressed; you are suffering from depression. You are not anxious; you are dealing with anxiety. If someone is wheeled into our community with a broken leg, we don't refer to them as broken, so why would we call someone depressed if they are suffering with depression? Every person with mental illness is still a real, human person, deserving of our attention, compassion, and love. They are struggling with mental illness; they are not the illness. Look to the added ending to this story; Jesus instructs the man to go home and tell his family and friends what had happened to him. No reticence about a relapse or concern like, "He was howling at the moon and breaking shackles yesterday, can we trust him?" Jesus didn't see a mentally ill man; he saw and trusted a man whose identity was not wrapped up in a mental illness.

The longer that the restrictions have been in place, the more stress is showing in our communities and in ourselves. I don't think I need to list the problems, but it is more than just confinement and isolation. But there is hope; in our faith, in our scriptures and in centuries of experience there is help. Not magic cures, but not just platitudes like 'have faith' or 'all will be well' either. What we have are stories that show the deep concern of God for our humanity.

Saul got sent a tormenting spirit,  
but he also got David offering music.

Daniel slept in a lion's den  
Peter slept in prison  
Jesus slept in a storm  
No matter the circumstances, you can take a nap.

Elijah was stressed from running from King Ahab,  
God gave him food and drink.

And here in the Gospels we get some practical advice about seeing people and their struggles and not just problems. Stories that can open all sorts of insights into people because we are the reason for all the grand theology - God loves the world and has come as Jesus Christ that we might have life and have it abundantly.