

## ***Healing Body, Mind and Spirit***

Mark 5:1–20

Center Church, Hartford

August 16, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

For me always the most interesting, and disturbing, thing about this story is the reaction of the people after the man is healed. They beg Jesus to leave their country. Now maybe it was because they didn't want to lose any more pigs, okay, I get it. But I would have thought that the renewed sanity of this man, who suffered from some kind of mental illness for many years (often what the Bible calls "demon possession" we would describe as mental illness) would have made them want to have Jesus stick around and do more healing!

Perhaps it was because they were still afraid of this man. One of the saddest things about mental illness is the stigma that attaches to it. When someone gets a diagnosis of cancer or some other awful physical illness, they will find support and caring from family and friends. So often when someone is diagnosed with a mental illness, however, they feel they have to hide it because they fear they will be judged, as though somehow this illness is a personal failing. Notice that, as opposed to so many of Jesus' healings, no one brings this man to Jesus. No family or friends make an effort to see if he can be healed by the great Teacher. He comes alone.

This pandemic we are experiencing has increased the mental and spiritual struggles of so many people. Folks who already suffered with mental illness have found the isolation and fear connected with COVID-19 has made everything worse. Many people who have not experienced any kind of mental illness find they cannot put a name to what they are feeling these days, but they know it's not right. Michelle Obama called it what it is: "depression." As with Jesus drawing out of the man the name of his "demon," Legion, so it is with naming what is going on with us: once we name something, we can begin to deal with it. But if we feel we have to hide it, we can't. Especially if we feel guilty because we think our suffering is so much less than others that we would feel ridiculous saying we are stressed and striving with mental and spiritual pains.

I cannot tell you how many times over the years of my ministry I have said to people who express that kind of guilt, "Listen. Your struggle is your struggle. It's what you have to deal with. God doesn't need you to compare it to the struggles of others. If you don't deal with this, it will get worse. Name what's going on with you and then let me help you seek out the resources you need to help you."

I've said that so many times. And yet several years ago when I finally admitted that I was descending into depression, I went through the same kind of guilt about seeking help when so many others were

so much worse off than I was. It took a group of clergy colleagues listening to me and helping me name what was going on for me to seek help. I didn't know how bad it was until it got better. Many mental illnesses are like that, slowly growing in power until you don't remember what you were like before. And yes, it can be frightening, both to you and to other people around you.

The man we call the Gerasene demoniac lived alone, far from human love of any kind. It may be that Jesus was the first person he had talked with in years. No wonder he wanted to follow Jesus after he was healed. But Jesus told him to go home, to tell others that he had been healed, that healing was possible, that God desired wholeness for one who suffered with mental illness as much as God desired wholeness for the blind or the leper. Because he told the story, we know the story, and so we are also compelled to tell it until everyone hears and believes this about God.

I can't heal like Jesus did. I can tell you that if you are struggling with depression or any other kind of mental or spiritual stress, you should not feel guilty or ashamed, nor do you need to hide it from your church or your family or your friends. The church cannot heal like Jesus did, but we can offer acceptance, love, hope and resources to those who deal with mental illness or distress so that no one need be as alone as that man in the country of the Gerasenes.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness has a set of prayers that I would like to share as I end this meditation with you.

We pray that God will help us dispel ignorance and misinformation about major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, severe anxiety and obsessive–compulsive disorder.

We pray that troubled minds and hearts, broken lives and relationships might be healed.

We pray that the darkness of stigma, labels, exclusion and marginalization might be dispelled for the sake of those touched by mental illness.

We pray for persons and families living with mental illness, for better treatment, for steadier recovery, for greater opportunity to work and serve.

We pray for compassionate, dedicated caregivers and mental health professionals; for new discoveries in brain research and better medications.

We pray that God may dispel doubt and despair for those who have lost hope and are discouraged. And to strengthen faith communities to be safe harbors in the storms.

We pray to be reminded of God's love and faithfulness, and to be reminded to share the light of love and service for those living with mental illness. Amen