

By Lahronda Welch Little

3/29/2020

The first things first, how are you after several weeks of physical distancing? I want to acknowledge that for some of us it's been very difficult. Human contact is important to our sense of wellbeing. However, there are those of us who are ok in isolation. I'll also mention that there are some who are ok in isolation as long as it's voluntary.

Secondly, I am not a mental health professional. What I am about to share is from the perspective of a pastoral care provider. I am a minister and a certified health coach. And for over 10 years, I have studied in the field of spirituality and health with a particular interest in spiritual formation. My goal in this lesson is to help us to re-think some of the ways in which we understand mental health and our relationship with God and to offer encouragement and suggestions on how to foster mental wellness during this time of physical distancing.

Luke 8: 26-39 NRSV

26 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. **27** As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. **28** When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"— **29** for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) **30** Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. **31** They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

32 Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. **33** Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. **35** Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. **36** Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. **37** Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. **38** The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, **39** "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

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What a powerful text. This narrative, which is also described in the gospels of Mark 5:1-20; and Matthew 8: 28-34, describes one who by virtue of his condition is isolated. He is not only physically distanced, he is also socially distanced. There is a distinction. To be physically distant suggests that, although one is not near people, there is some way through which one has access to communication or connection with others. For us that could mean the telephone, social media, texting, or FaceTime. Within the context of the scriptures, social connection could have come by way of people living together who were afflicted with the same or similar condition. The story in Matthew mentions 2 men, but Mark and Luke only mention 1. Again, the man in the Lukan text is both socially and physically distanced. He is not near other people, and presumably, he has no way of communicating with others.

Luke 8 describes to us the life of one who has suffered alone and the community response is to bind him up and try to pretend he's not there. But then Jesus comes on the scene. AND when Jesus comes into the picture, 3 things occur:

I. The first observation is Jesus invites conversation, and a lot of it. There was the conversation between Jesus and the person who was troubled. There was conversation between Jesus and Legion; between Jesus and the herdsmen; the herdsmen and the people in the city and the country. And then Jesus encouraged the one he healed to tell the people what God had done. In other words, this troubled person's condition and his treatment was not kept a secret. Jesus engaged and encouraged conversation regarding what looks like mental illness. Jesus essentially said, "let's talk about this."

II. The second thing I'd like to point out is the appearance of Legion. Traditionally, we understand Legion to mean "regiment"- which alludes to the military and precise order. Put another way, Legion represents the societal structures that militate against one's well being - these structures show themselves in healthcare systems, the financial system, and the penal system, even our access to food just to name a few. I mention these because the causes of mental illness are not simple and cannot be reduced to happenstance or someone being "a little off." It is a collection of interlocking, interconnecting issues that could include internal chemical imbalances, abuse, and lack of access to proper care - all of which could likely be exacerbated by situations of oppression and marginalization. Legion, I suggest, represents those circumstances that prevent wholeness and wellbeing.

III. Finally, and most importantly, when Jesus comes on the scene we learn that this troubled person's condition *did not exclude him from the presence of God*. This person was perfectly aware that God is present and God cares.

Mental illness is not a sin.

Mental illness does not in any way make us less human.

Mental illness is not a measure of how much faith one has.

Mental illness is not the absence of one's spirituality. And it certainly does not mean that God is not at work. And that is Good News.

Spirituality and Mental Health Lesson 2

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Mental illness is a condition that often requires treatment in a variety of forms, which may include a series of visits with a trained mental healthcare provider that may include prescription. And along with proper care, there are things we can do to help manage.

During these times we are facing, this time of physical distancing (and to be clear there are some who are physically AND socially distanced), feelings of anxiety, sadness, depression for some of us may likely become more pronounced. Our lesson from last week we talked about compassion and patience - that is for yourself and then to others.

- I'd like to encourage us all to stay connected. Stay connected with your best friends and family members; stay connected with your mental healthcare providers and maintain contact with your pastoral counselors. And if you know someone who is physically and socially distanced, please check on them.
- Identify your safe or brave spaces. Who are the people in your life that will allow you to speak freely and be, those who will not judge you. Who are the ones who provide a calming presence - even over the phone?
- For those of us who are working from home, it is easy to fall into the trap of working all day and all night. Try to resist that and build in breaks. As much as work is a way to channel certain emotions, and sometimes that is necessary, it is also important for the sake of balance and rest, to build in some time of silence, movement, and to eat good food. And by good food, I mean slow burning foods like vegetables, fruit, nuts, and grains.
- Take a walk and commune with nature.
- Find what brings you joy and do it.

Continue to cultivate your spiritual practices: breathe, meditate, pray and exercise. Yes, exercise can be a spiritual practice. And these practices can take on many forms - we do not have to be confined to traditional ways of being and doing.

Scripture Reflection:

What are other implications for health and wellbeing brought forward in Luke 8?

Practical Lesson:

What are some ways in which your church helps foster mental wellbeing?

Prayer:

Good and gracious God, thank you for loving us and all that we are. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, that we might have life and have it more abundantly - in body, mind, soul, spirit, and nature. Amen.

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