

This week is mental health awareness week. The hashtag for social media is “Get Loud” about mental health. Perhaps you saw the video of the Stella’s Circle Inclusion choir singing the new song they wrote with Amelia Curran called “Be the Change” at Rawlins Cross. Maybe you’ve heard the story about the new yellow bench at Gonzaga High School that encourages the students to pause, talk about and take care of their mental health. Individuals have shared their personal stories about their struggles with mental health.

It’s not something we talk much about at church. And yet it affects a lot of people. It affects members of my family and maybe its touched yours. As I listened this week to the stories, I started to wonder what Jesus would have to say about mental health. The bible is full of healing stories. It seems to me that Jesus ministry is about love and in particular those who find themselves on the margins. Jesus welcomes the ones who struggles the most and offers hope and healing.

When it comes to mental illness, whether it is for ourselves or for someone we love, we long for help, hope, the right medication, welcome, community, healing and most of all an end to their suffering. There are no simple answers or miracle cures but there is help and hope.

Our Gospel reading this morning gives us some clues about Jesus' response. The disciples are still shaking from the near drowning. Jesus has just rebuked the winds and calmed the raging seas. They are finally on dry land in the land of the Gerasenes. As they step out of the boat, a man who had a demon meets them. Nothing was working in life for him. He couldn't wear clothes and he had no home. In fact, he made his home among the tombs. The demons take one look at Jesus, fall to the ground and cry, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the most high God? I beg you, do not torment me." (Luke 8:29) Then Jesus asks the demon its name – Legion for there were many. They begged to go into the pigs instead of the abyss. When the towns people come to see what's happened they find the man clothed, in

his right mind and sitting at Jesus feet. The people from the community are so filled with fear that they asked Jesus to leave. The man healed begs to go with Jesus. Jesus says to him, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” (Luke 8:39)

This is not an easy story. In part because we don't talk about demons in the same way as they did in Jesus time. It's a struggle to understand. Maybe you are wondering the same thing. A few things helped me on the way. The preacher Nadia Bolz Webber writes, “I've confessed this before but I don't always know what to do when it comes to talk about demons in the Bible.

Especially when the demons talk and have names and stuff like that. I'm never sure if back then they had the exact same things going on that we do, but they didn't know about things like epilepsy or mental illness so they just called it all demon possession. But I do know that many of you, like myself, have suffered from addictions and compulsions and depression – things that have gotten ahold of us, making us do things we don't want to. Or making you

think you love things, or substances or people that are really destructive. So maybe if that, in part, is what having a demon is, maybe if it's being taken over by something destructive, then possession is less of an anachronism, and more of an epidemic.” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2013/06/demon-possession-and-why-i-named-my-depression-francis/>

Michael Rogness, a professor at Luther Seminary, writes “all the “demons” Jesus confronts have three things in common: they cause self-destructive behavior in the victim, the victim feels trapped in that condition, and they separate the victim from normal living in the family circle. Sound familiar? Don't many of us suffer from the same kind of snares and burdens?” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1719

So maybe we do know demons – they have names like anger, depression, addiction, fear, compulsion, and they claim our lives and make it impossible to remain part of the community, to remember that we are loved. We can't remember those words God whispers in our

ears. “You are loved. You are mine.” When Jesus steps off the boat and finds this man whose been suffering for so long, and says those words of hope and love, is it any wondered that those demons know their days are numbered? Love, community and hope help banish isolation and loneliness. The last thing that Jesus does before he returns to the boat is to return this man to his community, to his family circle. He asks to go with Jesus. He does not want to lose this new feeling. Instead of an invitation to follow, Jesus invites him to return. “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” (Luke 8:39)

With all healing stories, we need to proceed with caution. I’m not saying if you pray hard enough faith will cure you. I’m saying that God stands with us. I’m saying that Jesus shows us a path to healing and then walks with us. There is a hymn in our hymn book called “Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit.” It is hard to hear because it sounds out of key and jarring. The words of the last verse are: “Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit in our mind and in our heart; speak

your word that when we hear it, all our demons shall depart. Clear our thoughts and calm our feeling; still the fractured, warring soul, By the power of your healing, make us faithful, true and whole.” The music does not get easy to hear until the last words of the last verse as we sing “true and whole.”

In the season of Easter, we are reminded that Jesus offers us new life. It is a free gift and with it comes peace for our fractured souls and an invitation to wholeness. What Jesus does for the man possessed by demon spirits, he does for all of us. Jesus sends the demons away and invites us to wholeness and to community. As the body of Christ, we are called to work for the health and wholeness of all our brothers and sisters. No matter the challenges we face, we are God’s beloved children and we never walk alone. Amen.