

What Is Your Name?  
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
October 12, 2014  
Mental Health Awareness

**Psalm 139:1-12**

- <sup>1</sup> O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
<sup>2</sup> You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
<sup>3</sup> You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
<sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O Lord, you know it completely.  
<sup>5</sup> You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.  
<sup>6</sup> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
- <sup>7</sup> Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
<sup>8</sup> If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
<sup>9</sup> If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup> even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
<sup>11</sup> If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night’,  
<sup>12</sup> even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

**Mark 5:1-13**

<sup>1</sup> They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. <sup>2</sup>And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. <sup>3</sup>He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; <sup>4</sup>for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. <sup>5</sup>Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. <sup>6</sup>When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; <sup>7</sup>and he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.’ <sup>8</sup>For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’ <sup>9</sup>Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He replied, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’ <sup>10</sup>He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. <sup>11</sup>Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; <sup>12</sup>and the unclean spirits begged him, ‘Send us into the swine; let us enter them.’ <sup>13</sup>So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and were drowned in the lake.

I wasn't more than ten the first time we visited my grandmother at Torrance, a mental institution in southwestern Pennsylvania. I know this because I remember having visited her before my tenth birthday party, which my dad had to orchestrate because my mom had gone to be back with her mother after a recent suicide attempt and I was not surprised by the news of her attempt. We would visit my mom's side of the family at least three times a year when I was young. There were many visits where my grandmother was present with us, both mentally and physically. And there were some visits where she spent the days laying across her bed face down in her darkened bedroom, and some where we went to see her at Torrance. Of course, they now call it Torrance State Hospital, a public psychiatric hospital. Back then it was just the mental institution but we didn't use those words so we just called it Torrance. Those visits when my grandmother was with us, we would often find her up early, sometimes very early, often making pies and kolaczki and red velvet cake. I later learned this was a product of her manic episodes. My grandmother suffered most of her adult life with bipolar disorder, and by suffering, I mean what you might expect but I also mean suffering at the hands of doctors who were at a loss to help her, doctors who tried repeated courses of electroshock therapy which left her trapped inside her body, albeit "only" for a few days, while we sat on benches outside talking to her as if she was able to participate in conversation, as if there was nothing wrong, as if we weren't at a psychiatric hospital.

Her first attempt at suicide was not long after her husband died, leaving her with five girls ranging in age from six to twenty, and dying the day after my second-eldest aunt's seventeenth birthday. Living in a small coal-mining town - and when I say small, I mean small as in having two streets, named First and Second Street - people didn't know how to respond. Even family shied away, leaving five young girls to fend for themselves in the day-to-day and in the world of mental illness, which took their mother away shortly after their dad had been taken away from them. When we offer up people in prayer later, represented by the colored sticks, there will be a stick for my grandmother. There will be sticks for others, too, including other family members whose lives are marked by mental illness and addiction. There will be a stick for me and for the anxiety I manage with medication.

I have spent my whole life surrounded by and immersed in misunderstandings around mental wellness and mental illness. I can tell you with great certainty, and I know enough to know it needs to be said, that being your pastor is not what causes me anxiety. I am wired that way. I can do things to lessen the effects of anxiety, including taking medicine, just like those who suffer from bipolar disorder or schizophrenia or any of the other mental illnesses. The medicine doesn't make my tendency toward anxiety go away; that will be something that is part of me for as long as I live, just like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia and any of the other mental illnesses. I can also tell you with great certainty, and I know enough to know it needs to be said, that there is nothing you can do to make it go away. As kids,

my brother and I were regularly encouraged to get along, to be cheerful, to avoid sad topics while we were around my grandmother for fear of making her worse or bringing on a depressive episode, upon whose brink we always seemed to be teetering. The truth is that this is not truth.

Jesus met the man with the unclean spirits whom no one had the strength to subdue. “Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.” The tombs were the lowest places, hewn into the ground, and considered unclean and off-limits for those who wished to be permitted in the temple. And the mountains? In Israelite culture, a mountain is what you climb to get closer to God. From the unclean depths and the highest, holiest places equally, the unclean spirits tormented him and no one could subdue him. This is the truth. Mental illness of others is not within our control, most definitely not when the unclean spirits have free roam of the place, and it shows up in times and places we perceive to be sad as much as in times and places we perceive to be happy.

When the doctors found the right balance of lithium, which was so difficult to control with the other medications my grandmother took, I got to see my grandmother in ways unmasked. The constant thread was a steadfast faith. When I eulogized her ten years ago, the passage from Romans 8, which we hear so frequently at funerals, was what I used as well. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>1</sup> Everyone has their own reasons for choosing this reading. For me, I saw in her a faith that she came back to over and over again after wandering through her tombs and her mountains. Even her worst experiences did not separate her from the love of God; her life was a testament to this.

We never talked about her times at Torrance nor about the times when she would just lay in bed, always for fear that such memories would trigger another episode. I can only imagine what went through her head in those dark and darker and darkest days. I’d like to think that Psalm 139 was a drumbeat behind the noise of all of her own, shouting unclean spirits: “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; / if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. / If I take the wings of the morning / and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, / even there your hand shall lead me, / and your right hand shall hold me fast. / If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, / and the light around me become night’, / even the darkness is not dark to you; / the night is as bright as the day, / for darkness is as light to you.” God is present in all the darkness; God is not afraid of the darkness. This is good news of the gospel and good news I hope she held to.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:38-39.

The good news does not end there. We read, “Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’” This is such a big deal. This man who had been relegated to the outermost edges of the town, for that is where you put ritually unclean places like tombs, would have been devoid of human company and human conversation. What does Jesus do? He addresses him. He asks his name. He looks at him. He sees him. This is also the good news of the gospel; this is the way in which we are called to follow Jesus, Jesus who did not ignore, Jesus who did not avoid, Jesus who saw and spoke with, Jesus who said, “I see you there, struggling, and I am not afraid. What is your name?”

Of mental illnesses, anxiety is relatively manageable and relatively mask-able. I do not doubt some among you, when I said that I experience anxiety, thought something like, “but you seem so calm...but I’ve never seen you get ruffled.” I can be and do those things and still feel it filling my chest and, without medicine, feel the anxiety prickling just underneath my skin, physical sensations as much as an itch or pain. Not every mental illness or symptom of mental illness can be so easily tucked away or invisible. I’m not suggesting that following Jesus means pointing out those symptoms as conversation starters in an effort to recognize the challenges someone is having – not everyone is comfortable talking about what is going on with them but everyone is more than the sum of their symptoms. I am suggesting to follow Jesus means to see people, to not ignore, not avoid, to speak with people, acknowledging them, asking them their names.

We don’t live in a culture where this happens naturally or is encouraged. Neither did Jesus. I’ve mentioned before that Jesus was a radical – that came out of Jesus behaving counter-culturally. We’re called as followers to be counter-cultural, too. During our prayers as a community of faith, we will offer before God those people we know who struggle with mental illness, with addiction, some with both. I’ll collect them and place them here in this bucket of sand so we might together make visible those we know who struggle, so we might together witness to those whom one another loves, and so we might together recognize that we alone do not bear the weight of worry for ourselves, for people we love, for people we know. For every stick is a person connected to this church somehow. Mental illness and addiction touch us all and we are called out by Christ to stop keeping that a secret, to stop ignoring and avoiding, to see that illness is illness whether physical or mental and all who are ill deserve care. “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me...”<sup>2</sup> So may it be for you and for me.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:34-36.

Let us pray: God, where can we go from your spirit; where can we flee from your presence? You are there no matter where, or how, we are and we offer our thanks this day. Amen.