

May 5, 2019

Luke 8:26-39

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“Restored”

The ministry of Jesus always involved healing. His interactions with people brought hope and wholeness to those who were in despair and suffering sharing his light and his compassion with them. In this passage from 8th chapter of Luke’s Gospel, the healing and interaction between Jesus and this man possessed by demons is very dramatic. The spirit inside the man was talking to Jesus asking him not to deal with him. Jesus ordered the spirit to come out and sent it to the herd of pigs. The pigs in turn run off a cliff and drowned. Then when the person was healed, he was sitting at the feet of Jesus in his right mind. It would be a scary sight if we witnesses all of that today. I can see how we, the people of the 21st century, might feel uncomfortable with the language of demons and spirits. How quickly we might disconnect from the story and checked out of what is happening. So, I invite us to think a little bit more deeply and look a bit closely at the reality of this man’s struggle, his inside struggle. I believe we might be able to relate to what was going on inside of him better and see how his story brings hope to us today. So, let’s do just that.

We cannot know for sure how this man felt. Each person’s experience and struggle are very unique. But we will use our spiritual imagination to reflect on how he might have felt. The text helps us with it. The Bible says that This man was possessed by demons or spirits. If we think of being possessed by something that brought him down and pressed him down, we can name words like hopelessness, exhaustion, frustration. It seems like something was draining life out of him, not letting him do regular everyday things, not letting him enjoy small things in life. Because of all of that, most likely, this person was not even feeling God’s presence because of how this something very dark wrapped him and was holding him tightly. This something was so strong that in the passage it says this man was driven by the demon into the wild. So, his life did not belong to him. He did not have any control of it. Something else took possession of it. That is why people put chains on him and shackles, so that this demon would not take him places and would not cause any other harm to this person and those around them. It also says that this person lived in the tombs or out in the wilderness. This person had an unknown condition that people of that time did not know anything about and were scared of his unusual behavior. Because of all of that we can imagine this person was not welcome in a lot of places. So, there was not only deep suffering in him struggling with day to day things but there was this isolation from the community. Sometimes we call it stigma, when someone is not welcomed in a community because of an issue or illness.

So, this is how this demoniac of Gerasene might have felt: pressed down, hopeless, isolated, desperate to get relief and to be restored to life that is beyond everyday struggle and

community. So when we look at how this person might have felt we can see how many circumstances, situations, conditions in life could take us to that same place. And among those, we could name mental illnesses. In fact, a couple of commentaries interpret this man's condition as a mental illness or a brain disorder.

In the text the condition of this man was described as "possessed by demon." We do not use the language of demons and unclean spirits anymore. But in the ancient times, the worldview was very different from ours. Demons, spirits, nymphs, and angels were part of the fabric of life for the ancient people. They attributed calamities, natural disasters, certain behaviors to the control of those spiritual creatures. They used amulets, sacrifices, and rituals to appease those spiritual powers. But our worldview and our language have changed. We know that the natural disasters come from forces of nature and or human activity, and mental illnesses or brain disorders are caused by a different brain functioning. In the past 100 years, we have come very far in the research, treatment, and the language that we use to talk about mental health and mental illnesses.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac should now be interpreted so that it speaks a word of assurance and hope to those for whom every day is a battle with depression, fear, anxiety, or compulsive behavior. Because it is in the midst of this battle, that Jesus came, reached out to this man, made him whole, and restored him back to his life and his community. So, the hope of this message is that we are not alone in whatever we are battling with, Jesus comes to us. And the other good news is that Jesus did not let this person stay with him and follow him. Jesus sent him to his community so that that man can share his story of struggle and what God has done for him through Jesus, so this person became a first evangelist bringing the good news to the community. Today we have someone who shares her story with us. It is a member of our congregation, serves on our leadership board, she used to be on our staff here, please welcome Kris Shoaf as she shares her story of faith and bringing the good news of God with her community of faith.

Kris Shoaf's Story:

Did you know that 1 in 5 adults in America will experience a mental illness in any given year? Did you know that 1 in 25 adults live with a serious mental illness? That means that many of us in here today are either currently living with a mental illness or love someone who is battling a mental illness. May is Mental Health Awareness Month. I am here to share my story with you this morning in an effort to show that this is a safe space so that we can begin to share our stories with each other. I am sharing my story so that we can begin to reduce some of the stigma and shame that comes along with mental illness. None of us are immune to this and many of us live at a greater risk of mental illness due to genes and family history that is beyond our control. So, in order to share my whole story, I should probably go back to my childhood.

My parents were very young when I was born, they were just 16 and 18 years old. My father had just graduated high school and enlisted in the army and my mother never went back after her sophomore year. Within 5 years, they had 2 more children, my sister and my brother. As you can imagine life was not easy for them and shortly after my brother was born, it's probably no surprise that they were divorced. What is surprising is that my father received full custody of 3 children; a 5 and 3-year-old plus an infant. We rarely saw my mother in those early years. Life was hard for us and I imagine that it was hard for her as well. One of my earliest memories is my father taking my sister and I to visit my mother in a mental hospital. Of course, it would be years later before I ever understood what that meant. As we got a little older, I remember seeing her a little more, but still not often. What I remember most about those years is that every time we were with her, she would spend the evenings at the bars. You see, my mother was an alcoholic and many years later, when I was an adult, she was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. Looking back, I suspect the bi-polar disorder was always there, waiting to be diagnosed.

Growing up with a mother who was never there physically or emotionally was difficult, but I always tried to make the best of it. I was (I still am) an optimistic and hopeful person. And despite everything, I prided myself in being different than my mother. I wasn't going to make the same "mistakes" she made. I was a stronger person than she was, and I was going to do better with my life. I graduated high school, went to college, got married and found a good job; all the proper and right things young adults are supposed to do, right? When you are a child, you have little control of your circumstances but as an adult, we're told if we work hard, good things will come to us so as a young and naive adult, I thought I had it all figured out. I met a wonderful man whom I married, I had a very good job and after a little delay, we started our family. All seemed to be going according to MY plan and I felt blessed and grateful for the gifts God had given me. What could I possibly be unhappy about? However, in mid-2009, I found myself beginning to feel sadder and sadder.

It started with me not feeling well physically, I had constant migraines and had just recently been diagnosed with fibromyalgia and was in constant pain, however it was more than that. I wasn't able to sleep, and I was feeling more and more anxious about everyday things. You know that kind of anxiety that can sometimes be good, such as when you have a job interview, or when you are sharing your story at 3 services the following Sunday? It's like that but it never goes away and it's exhausting to constantly be at this heightened sense of awareness, you feel like you are never able to rest. And I felt sad...all the time and I couldn't understand why. My whole life I have been upbeat, positive, and optimistic but I couldn't shake these feelings.

I remember that my husband went on a 2-week work trip to Germany during this time and I felt like I was going to lose my mind, but I couldn't explain just what was happening. One night I couldn't sleep, and I waited for the hours to tick by so that I could call my father as soon as morning came, I think I finally caved and called him at 5 am. I was an emotional and mental mess...I had no idea what was going on. At this time, those around me convinced me that I

needed to speak to my doctor about how I was feeling so I did, and she immediately diagnosed me with depression.

To those on the outside, I am sure it was hard to understand why I was depressed. I had a nice family and a nice home, it seemed like I had it all...I thought I had it all, but I really didn't. However, with the help of my doctor, a counselor and the support of my family and friends, I slowly began to feel better. Over time I began to feel like my old self, someone who could cope with life's everyday stresses and challenges without wanting to curl up into a ball or cry myself to sleep every night.

During that season I had many friends and family that loved and supported me right where I was, however there were some whom I am sure meant well but would say things like "just give it God and He will take care of it" or "you know, worrying is really a sin because you are not trusting God to take care of everything" or my favorite, "God only gives us what we can handle". I do believe that these sentiments came from a sincere place, but it was never helpful to hear that my mental state was potentially a result of my sins. Nevertheless, I tried not to dwell on these comments and instead focus on my own health, both mental and physical.

At the end of 2012, my family relocated to southern Indiana, right across the river from Louisville, KY. I had moved several times so by now, I had an idea of what we needed to do to acclimate to our new community. First, find a church, then we find the library and the YMCA. On the surface it seemed like we were adjusting well, we found a nice church where we felt at home. My husband was working a lot of hours, but the kids were doing okay in school and I was making friends. However, something wasn't quite right...I was slowly starting to feel like I had felt before. I missed my friends and my church family in Powell, one of my kids was struggling to adjust and the other wasn't herself. I never saw my husband and I was facing unanswered medical questions that left me very worried about my future.

We were on vacation in Phoenix during Spring Break a few months later when I felt like I was trying to hold onto a slippery slope; I could feel myself slipping into another depression and I couldn't stop it. I was praying, no let me restate that, I was pleading with God for answers, but none seemed to come.

When I returned home, I immediately found a doctor and went to see her about getting on some medication again but this time it wasn't working quick enough or well enough. I was anxious all the time, I couldn't think, and everything just felt heavy. I was tired all the time, it was all I could do to care for my children and because my husband always seemed to be working and because I didn't want to add anymore to his already full plate, it was easy to keep most of this from him. At this point, I was no longer able to pray, I no longer knew what to say and I couldn't keep my attention on anything for more than a few moments. Everything felt hazy and after several months of it all just getting worse and worse, I began to wonder if it would be easier if I was no longer here.

One day, in a desperate plea and not knowing how to make the pain stop, I grabbed a pair of very sharp scissors in front of my husband. I didn't know what I was going to do with them, I just grabbed them and held tight as I slid down the wall in tears. At that moment, my husband realized I needed professional help. He went with me as I was checked into a mental hospital. I was diagnosed with severe major depression and suicidal ideology, because by now I had a plan of how I could end my life. I spent nearly 10 days in the hospital that month, during two different visits. It was one of the worst experiences of my life. I was lonely and terrified, but most of all, I feared that I would never be myself again.

When I was better and able to go home, I was on a couple of medications and seeing a counselor every other week along with a psychiatrist who monitored me closely. Very...very slowly, I began to feel a little better. It didn't happen overnight and there were days where I still cried and wondered if I would ever be able to sit still and not feel that deep pit of anxiety that always seemed to be lurking deep inside of me. Over time, I slowly began to talk to God again, sometimes wondering why He had allowed me to go through all of that. Around this time, my husband felt God guiding our family back to Columbus, where we could raise our family in the community that we loved and where we felt loved. Eventually, as the months and years passed by, I resolved trying to understand why I had gotten so sick. I now know, without a doubt, that I wasn't being punished nor do I believe that God allowed it to happen to me, things just happen sometimes, and we will never know why.

My mental illness was no different than someone who has arthritis or battles high blood pressure. There are things we can do to make ourselves a little healthier such as talking to doctors, taking our medication and exercise but a lot of it is just how we were individually created, our genetics and predispositions. I have learned that my past illnesses are nothing to be ashamed of, my brain was sick just as another person's heart is unhealthy or they have bad knees.

I am sharing all of this with you today in hopes that we can begin to be more open about our experiences, that we will no longer be embarrassed because we can't "handle life on our own". We were never created to do all of this on our own. Author Sarah Griffith Lund writes in her book "Blessed Are the Crazy" that "we are living testimonies, whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not." She encourages us to embrace this calling as speakers of truth, to claim our right to tell our stories. She says "we can preach our own truths; God gives us permission and the church needs to hear it. We don't have to pretend that everything is okay, because it is not". Sarah says "It is in the offering and receiving of testimony that hope can be found. This is what we are born to do."

If I look back to the summer of 2013, I could never have imagined I would be where I am today, working full time in ministry, a candidate to become a deaconess. There is no way I could have dreamed that God would have all of this in store for me.

The semi-colon is the universal sign for Suicide awareness. An author uses a

semicolon when he or she could end a sentence but chooses not to. As I finished my first week long intensive deaconess class last summer, I wanted to do something to mark how far I have come. So, when I returned home, I had a semicolon tattooed inside my wrist as a constant reminder that God is still talking in my life. Larry told us in his sermon last week that “we are called to share our stories.” As I share my story today, I am also here to tell you, that regardless of where you are, God is still speaking into your life. If you are hurting or aching from the pain of a seemingly invisible illness to everyone around you, know that God knows your pain. He sees you and He loves you.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story with you.

Kris, we thank you for your courage in answering God’s call to share this testimony with us. We know it was not easy for you. We are encouraged by your story and feel hopeful by your words. And we hope that your sharing will produce more sharing among us. So we open up and raise awareness about mental health and illnesses. The month of May is Mental Health awareness month. The National Alliance on Mental Illness teaches us that, “mental illnesses are medical conditions that disrupt a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life.” (NAMI) “Mental illnesses, or brain disorders, can affect persons of any age, race, religion, or income. Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character, too little faith or lack of prayer. Most mental illnesses are biologically based, and most are treatable. The good news about mental illness is that recovery is possible; help is available. Most people diagnosed with a serious mental illness can experience relief from their symptoms by actively participating in an individual treatment plan, and they can live productive lives sharing their unique gifts with the world.” (UCC) So, today we start our conversations and raising awareness on mental health and mental illness. We have a display in the Main Hall with some resources and information. As you leave today from the sanctuary, you will be offered to take a green ribbon for mental health awareness month. We will also begin a book study to start conversations, to raise awareness, to share our own experiences, and support one another. The book is called Blessed are the Crazy by Sarah Lund. We will begin the study in June on two different times, you are welcome to sign up for a book study and get your book at that display in the Main Hall. Friends, Jesus comes and shares God’s light with us, compassion and healing and calls us to share our stories for struggle and of God’s hope. May we receive this healing and answer God’s call. Amen.

