

The Healer: The Oppressed

Mark 5:1-15

Isn't that an amazing testimony? It's been great to celebrate all these experiences of healing in our congregation! ... For those of you who don't know me, my name is Gunnar and I'm the director of worship here. I'm also under care in our presbytery—which is just a fancy way of saying I am working to become a pastor. And I'm only able to do that because of your prayer and support. So, thank you!

I'm looking forward to us continuing in our series called "The Healer" tonight/today. We've been exploring different stories of how Jesus healed people in the book of Mark. And then we are asking how those stories of healing impact us today... We are going to tackle a rather controversial topic tonight/today and that is the issue of mental health. I actually asked to speak on this topic, because it's a very important topic to me. It's an important topic in general, actually! We know that around 47 million people in the US suffer from some kind of mental illness in a given year—47 million! That's 1 in every 5 people. Given that statistic, I can say that one of two things is true of you: either you yourself suffer from a mental illness or someone you love does...

So, I'd like us to explore what the Bible says on this topic. And in order to do that, I'd like us to start with a story of a man that Jesus encountered who was facing an intense case of mental illness. You'll find this story in Mark, chapter 5, verse 1. We're going to find some important lessons from this passage about how we can view mental illness from a Christian perspective...

"[Jesus and the disciples] came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before him. And crying out with a loud voice, he said, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For [Jesus] was saying to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many."

This sounds like a pretty hopeless situation so far, doesn't it? Mental illness can certainly make us feel hopeless... But, as we consider this topic from Scripture, we're going to find that this is an area in our lives that Jesus wants to bring us healing and hope. So, I'd like to pray that he does that in our time together...

We are going to explore our passage by asking three questions about mental health, that you'll find on your outline. And, before we do that, it may be helpful to define what we mean when we talk

about mental health. Because that term isn't always understood in our culture. This definition comes from a book called *Grace for the Afflicted* by Michael Stanford. I've found this book really helpful, so I've included information about it in your worship guide. But mental health, according to that book, is that area of our health that involves four things: "thoughts, moods, behavior, and ability to relate to others." Could you say those with me? Thoughts, moods, behavior, and ability to relate to others.

Mental illness, then, is when those things aren't functioning quite right... It's when they're sick. And these illnesses, these mental sicknesses, run the gamut—they can be related to anxiety, depression, trauma, or even dementia. And we know that all of these illnesses affect our minds and our lives in a profound way...

QUESTION 1: Where do mental health issues come from?

So, in light of that, I'd like us to consider our first question: Where do mental health issues come from? Have you ever wondered that? Why do we have these issues?

What we find in our passage is that our mental well-being has a close connection to our well-being in the other components of our lives. And any of those components can be the source of our mental health concerns. These components are the different aspects of our human person, and there are four of them: the spiritual, physical, relational, and mental [line image on screen]. Each of these components are at play in the situation with this demonized man in our story...

Let's start with the spiritual. We find in our passage that this man is virtually loaded with demons—he is possessed to the max! In that last verse we read, Jesus asked for the name of this demon and the response was, "My name is Legion, for we are many." Pretty freaky! I can almost imagine these demonic voices speaking together all at once through this man—it's like some kind of horror movie! This man was taken over by a team of demons who were making a total mess of his life.

On the mental side of things, he was no longer in his "right mind," as we're going to find him later in the passage. In fact, the times we read of this man speaking to Jesus, we find that it's not really him speaking... it's the demons speaking through him. He no longer has control of his mental faculties.

And physically, he is said to have super-human abilities. Unfortunately, we are told that he was using those abilities to do harm to himself and threaten harm to others. And, eventually, this risk of harming others is what ostracized him from his community—it's what impacted him relationally. They couldn't risk having him around anymore, because he was too dangerous...

So, do you see how each one of these areas affected the others? This is the case for us, too! We are holistic human beings. Each of us have all of these components at work in our lives. And they're all connected to each other... When we are unwell in one area, it has a negative impact on the other areas. And when we get healthier in one area, it can have positive implications for the others... This is especially true when it comes to our mental health...

My mom went through an intense and terrible season for her mental health a few years ago... She had been wrestling with intense depression. And it eventually got so bad, that she would get disconnected from her surroundings. After going through that for some time, she ended up spending

most of her days in her room, unable to interact with others... In the end my mom had to check in to the hospital for psychological care...

Now, after the doctors looked into her situation, they ended up finding the cause of her issues... You see, my mom had broken her leg and she was also dealing with some other physical health issues that she was on medication for. The doctors said that it was the combination of all these physical things that were the problem. And after they dealt with those particular issues, what do you think happened? ... She started to get better! And the rest of those areas that were impacted started to get better, too...

As I look back at that, it's quite interesting—the source of my mother's mental health concern was found in a less apparent physical health issue... Friends, we need to look at our health in a holistic way! Each of our components are interconnected. And so, we have to be open to the possibility that an apparent issue in one area of our health could be caused by an altogether different area of our health...

I want to encourage you—if you are facing a mental health concern, it could have to do with something that you would have never seen coming! And this is where prayer and discernment and leaning on community come into play... Because it's a journey, friends! We need to consider all the options of how Jesus may bring healing in our lives—even if it's not what we would immediately expect.

QUESTION 2: What role does the spiritual play in our mental health?

Now, there is one particular source for our mental health concerns, out of those four components, that can be especially troubling... And that leads us to our second question: What role does the spiritual play in our mental health?

In our story, the spiritual clearly played a big role in this man's mental health issue. Michael Stanford argues that this man actually had symptoms of being on the schizophrenic spectrum... But, it is so apparent that that mental illness was a result of the demonic. I mean, for starters, he had super-human strength! And, more than that, he has multiple other beings speaking through him all at once. So, this is not your typical mental illness... There is something deeper. It is apparent that demonic possession is at work...

There have been times when my mental health issues were more intense than usual—when I was facing doubts and fears that were especially intense or odd. And with the help of spiritual mentors, I was able to see that there were some spiritual things at play. It was apparent that the enemy was messing with me... Friends, we believe that the spiritual realm is involved in our lives. We believe that we are called to do spiritual warfare. We believe that the evil spiritual forces in this world can mess with us mentally, just as they can physically... But, we have to ask: is this always the case? I don't think it is...

It may surprise you that we have multiple examples in the Bible of people suffering from mental illness... King Saul is believed to have been bipolar. King David experienced bouts of intense anxiety. Samson meets the criteria for antisocial personality disorder. Elijah experienced a deep depression.

And on and on we could go... And each of these cases, the Bible shows us that these were not necessarily spiritual problems! No demons required!

But many Christians struggle with this. It is so easy, when we are facing mental illness, to feel like there is something wrong with us spiritually. We can begin to fear that our faith is not good enough—that our mental illness is a result of our lack of faith. And if that's you, can I just tell you: That is plainly not how Christianity works. That is not how the gospel works! Nothing can jeopardize your right standing before God— because it's not about what you do it's about what God has done in Jesus Christ... So, let me tell you directly: you are not a weak person or a bad Christian if you suffer from a mental illness. You can pursue the care that you need and know that you are not failing God.

So, the spiritual plays a role in our lives, including in our mental health. But it doesn't necessarily have to be the cause of our mental health issues. And so, we have to be open to other possible sources for our problem if we are going to find the healing we are looking for.

QUESTION 3: How do we resolve our mental health problems?

And that leads us to our third question: How do we resolve our mental health problems? How do we respond when we are facing a mental illness? Well, I would recommend doing what Jesus did—go straight to the source. We have to identify what the key issues are and seek solutions, with God's help!

Jesus knew exactly what was causing all of the issues for the man in our story. Let me read verses 10-15 to see how this man's story ends—it ends a lot more hopeful than it started!

“And [Legion] begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now a great herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him, saying, “Send us to the pigs; let us enter them.” So [Jesus] gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the pigs; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the sea.

The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid.”

You see, once Jesus resolved the source of the issue—once he cast those demons out— the man found healing! It often isn't until the source of our problems are identified and dealt with that we experience the relief that we desperately need...

We have to look at all the categories of our life and then we have to be open to the solutions God may bring our way. Because we believe that God can heal us supernaturally and that he can also heal us naturally. Both of these come from him! No matter where our healing comes from in the immediate sense, it always comes from Jesus in the ultimate sense. He deserves all the credit!

And so, when we are facing a medical problem it is OK to seek a medical solution! This is just as true for us mentally as it is physically. Why? Because they are both physiological concerns! The Bible even

acknowledges this, when it lists mental illness alongside other common physical ailments. We can recognize that there are medical, natural things at play... Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't seek supernatural healing! And it also doesn't mean we should give up on prayer, or Bible reading, or worship. But it does mean that we can pursue natural healing alongside all of those supernatural things.

And often times, when it comes to our mental healing, we need to be courageous enough to look at the mental category. That is often the source of our challenge... And, to be vulnerable, that has been difficult for me to accept in my own life. I have suffered from anxiety since I was a little kid. I can still remember my first panic attack when I was in grade school... Over the course of my life, I've struggled with that anxiety in a variety of ways. And sometimes it has been just downright terrifying... Standing up here, as you can imagine, is no picnic!

Now, I tried to address the physical, relational, and spiritual areas of my life in an effort to find relief. I made changes to my routine. I started working out and changed my diet. And I asked others to pray for my healing. But none of those things resulted in complete healing. I still wasn't getting the relief that I needed...

Over the course of my journey, I started to realize that I was neglecting the source of my problems... The mental category. More specifically, I had avoided therapy and medication... I can recall a conversation years ago with a pastor who I trusted a lot. I remember him telling me that therapists and mental illness medications are a joke... Those things that he said stuck with me for a long time. It was so impactful that, even after I married a therapist, I still wasn't up for going to therapy!

But here's the good news— By God's grace, I've started to come around! Because of the support of loved ones, including the pastors here, I've started to see a therapist. And, while I'm still a work in progress, I've begun to finding healing. And I praise God for that! He's been with me every step of the way.

Now, I'm sharing this with you tonight/today because you may be like me. You've addressed the spiritual, the physical, the social issues in your life, only to find no relief. And so, you're asking, what's next? What do I do? Well, put simply, you may have to go straight to the source.

If that's you, can I just tell you—It is OK to get counseling. It is OK to look into medications. It is OK to get the help you need... God won't love you any less. He may even show you just how much he loves you through the process... It takes courage to pursue this, and so let me remind you—you're not alone. Your church family is with you. This is a place where you can feel loved, feel supported, and know that others are with you.

Conclusion

And to that end, we have people who would love to support you through this. We actually have a trained counseling team at Chapel Hill. They are amazing. They can listen and process what you're facing with you. And they want to help in any way that they can. So, if that is something

you may be interested in, please call the number on the screen or ask someone at the connect center about how to connect with our counseling services [number on screen]. Someone will get in touch with you. Jesus may just use that experience to bring you the healing that you're looking for.

Friends, the Bible shows us that our mental health concerns are legitimate concerns. And it even shows us how we can address these concerns... We look at our health holistically. We ask God to guide us as we address our issues right at the source. We pray for God's healing, whether that comes naturally or supernaturally. And through all of that, we can lean on our community for the support that we need... Let's pray that God would help us as we do that...