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9:00 a.m. Christian Education

10:00 a.m. Worship

Children's Sunday School during Worship



“Crazy Talk”

Luke 8: 26-39

June 20, 2010

Rev. Barbara Royle



Recently, here at church, we had the opportunity to host two mental illness seminars. The first was an overview of some of the conditions, we have heard, but know little about; Schizophrenia, Bipolar, depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and suicide, to name a few. Our hope was to provide information to understand and thus avoid additional pain for those who suffer from these disorders.

You see, our lack of understanding about mental illness can lead to thinking we are hearing crazy talk, when most are not crazy at all. Some conditions are caused by a deficiency of chemicals in the brain that prevents rational thinking and clear decision making. Science has discovered that with the right medication, many of these people can lead normal lives. When this is not the case the typical reaction is to avoid and isolate them which only exacerbates the pain they already endure. We do this because their behavior can be strange to us. We see it more as a mental problem than a medical diagnosis. Our lack of education causes us to react out of fear instead of knowledge. In addition to their disorder they are shunned, have difficulty making friends, and are often refused employment, insurance, medication or helpful doctors. They too, are afraid.

I revisited this reality recently when I met with my longtime friends in Illinois for our annual reunion. In this 5 day slumber party, we have a rule: no men allowed. But I suspect none of our husbands have been dying to come either!

As always, the ten of us gathered in joyous times of connection. We are all very different: One is out conquering mountains like Kilimanjaro, or backpacking across South America. Another is surviving a rare cancer while writing poetry. One is training and competing in yearly triathlons; another is the primary caregiver for her husband; several are traveling to places like India and Tanzania. They have been teachers, therapist, a librarian, a speech therapist and

a principal. For years they have called me the church lady and I don't mean the old Laugh-in TV show version!

They are all fun, energizing, competent women who enjoy their lives no matter what it brings. And they are all women of wisdom from whom I drink deeply.

We first met many years ago in the Presbyterian Church in Crystal Lake, Illinois. We were young parents and each of us played major roles of leadership in the church because the church not only brought us together; it bound us together through our growing faith. We began as a book club, but it was our faith in God and how that carried us that was the real glue that kept us together. We have been there for each other through the significant transitions of our lives; raising children, new careers, divorce, widowhood, remarriage. Seven of the ten have moved to other parts of the country, so we made a commitment to gather each year.

In the midst of all the enjoyable things we are doing, there are, as for all of us, those hurdles in life that give us pause. So each year we invest in sharing our collective wisdom for the challenges that come our way. One has a grandchild with autism; another with Asperger's syndrome. Another has a grown son with Schizophrenia, unable to work, and for whom the right medication has not yet been found.

I asked her to tell me about his illness. "What is life like for him?" I said. and it is with her permission that I share her response with you, as a way to enter the demoniac story today. She told me that Matt was afraid to leave his house for fear he would be picked up or questioned by the police. Without being able to hold a job, he is worried about being mistaken for being homeless. Everyday Matt hears voices, forcing him to decipher if these are his thoughts or someone else's. The schizophrenic's thoughts are never calm and always life is about sorting out what is real and what is not. Like the demoniac, he is socially isolated from others by his condition and the voices leave him feeling he has been demonized. She said he and their family know this Scripture well.

So we come to this confusing story, a bit uncomfortable. A man speaking crazy talk; demons who talk and pigs running off cliffs; how do we make sense of all this? Today our term for demons is mental illness, coincidentally, a phrase we don't understand much more than demons. Furthermore, I think we can easily place those whom we don't understand in chains too. We don't invite them to parties; we don't engage them in conversation, we don't spend time with them; we don't know who they are.

But they are people like you and me; people in our workplace; in our families; people right here in our church. And I believe that God can do great things through them just as God did with the demoniac. Consider Van Gogh, who struggled with mental illness and became a great artist in spite of it. He had something to say through his gift of art and did. Or what about the great composer Shumann or actors like Robin Williams, who suffered mental illness as they created? Like the demoniac, they broke out of their chains releasing their gifts of great music that ironically can bring healing to us.

Jesus had just started his ministry in Gentile country, when he came across this strange man. He was living not in a house but in a cave where the dead were buried. He wore no clothes and was bound with shackles and chains.

The man is shouting at Jesus. But Jesus is not afraid; he does not turn and walk away. He does not shun or isolate him, but recognizes the man is imprisoned by both the demons and the community and reaches out to him. Jesus commands the demons to leave him; heals him and the man is now both freed and saved.

Naturally, the man is overjoyed! For the first time in his life, he is free and able to connect with others. The voices are gone from his head and he wants to follow Jesus as a disciple. But instead, Jesus commissions him to be an evangelist and says "Go and tell everyone what God has done for you."

What wonderfully empowering words these are! They are not only for the demoniac of long ago. These words of Jesus are for us today. We too, are shackled and held fast by our own fears, just like the town people in this story. The people were afraid of the demoniac and afraid of this new power they had witnessed. Better to keep the status quo, they thought, and asked Jesus to leave. They decided to choose fear over faith, thereby missing the opportunity to be freed like the demoniac.

The last few weeks, we have been reminded God has blessed us so we can be a blessing to others. Two thoughts about that: We do not earn our blessings and they have a purpose: to give us joy and to pass it on to others. If we think about it, we can name the great things God has done for us, even in the midst of our pain and sorrow. Yet when we hear these words, "Go and tell everyone what God has done for you." we are shackled by fear.

Why is that? I think because images immediately flood our minds of knocking on doors, or standing on corners, talking about Jesus. We imagine arguing over our beliefs and losing friends or family. We know the rules: don't talk about politics or religion because many might consider it crazy talk. We are afraid of being shackled, yet often, we shackle ourselves.

But I don't think Jesus is asking the demoniac or us, to go and quote the Bible to all you meet; or tell everyone what you believe; or persuade them to come to church. Jesus is simply saying you have been blessed. Don't hoard it. Let people know who I am. That's all. Telling others what God has done for us might very well be a needed blessing to another. Hearing our blessings could be just the light of hope needed in the darkness of someone's soul. It just may help another recognize what God is doing in their lives too.

I think, just like the townspeople, it is easier for us to deal with the chains of fear that hold us back, than dare to mention God. And I want you to know it isn't any easier for pastors to do this either. In fact I never tell someone what I do, unless I'm asked, and here's one example why:

We live in a neighborhood that is a bit eclectic in the religion department. We have a Presbyterian turned clairvoyant who does healings in her home; a Catholic

and a Buddhist for starters. Several years ago a new family moved in with interesting careers. As we met on the sidewalk for the first time, the woman asked me the dreaded question; "So what do you do for a living?" I don't volunteer this information, but I also don't deny it, so I answered, "I'm a Presbyterian minister serving in a church. And her response? "Oh great! I have just spent several months house hunting all over the metro area and it's just my luck to find myself living across the street from a minister. I knew this would happen!" I shriveled internally. I found her very interesting and wanted to get to know her but did not think the feeling was mutual. I looked for opportunities to get acquainted and over the last several years there have been very few.

Then a couple of weeks ago, Allen and I were sitting on our front porch and over she came. She had an ethical situation at work she wanted to run by me. After describing the situation of how a colleague asked her to cover up information, she said, "Well, you're our walking conscience, what do you think?"

I was delighted with this encounter, not because of the label, but for the bridge she provided. I think this is the key. It's not about initiating a conversation about my faith, my church, or getting her to attend my church. I think it's more about listening for a place in which I can connect. Looking back I wish I had said, "Sounds like you've had an encounter with ministers before!" It could have led to a rich conversation that might have allowed me to share the good things God has done for me. But at the time I was too busy shriveling!

I think just being available or listening for a person's feelings and not always their words, might make us more approachable. We might be better able to hear them knocking on some doors that we might open. Without packaging my own discomfort I can be like the townspeople in our passage, sending Jesus away. The clairvoyant and I, have come to appreciate each other. The other day on my walk, she said to me, "I see you as pretty open, able to see both sides of a situation, what do you think about the Israeli/ Palestinian situation?" and we connected.

When Jesus says, "Go and tell the others what God has done for you" we all have something to share. Like someone said to me last week, "If this missional stuff means I have to go ring doors bells, it's not going to happen. But if it means I can tell someone what God has done for me, I have a lot to say!" I think looking for those bridges of conversation and crossing them, instead of turning away, can be quite rewarding.

Remember the first time you prayed out loud? It was uncomfortable. You couldn't breathe. You were flushed and you vowed never again. But then you did and each time it got easier until one day you said, this isn't uncomfortable anymore. I feel freed and your chains were broken. That's how it is with telling the good things God has done for us. When we dare to share them, God replaces our fear with joy.

Connection might begin by setting aside our book on a flight and listening to the stranger beside us. It might be initiating a conversation with a one who is alone at a party. It might be with a waitress, or a new person in the narthex. We all

have to find our own way to connect with others. But it is not helpful to bring an unspoken agenda of getting them to come to church, or teaching them about Jesus, or telling them what we believe without a bridge. It's more about caring enough to be a blessing to another so that they too, can recognize the good things God is doing in their lives. We can do this. I know, with the help of God, we can do this. **Amen**