

And Action! Lectures and Exorcism  
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO  
January 25, 2015 – Third Sunday after Epiphany

**Mark 1:21-28** *Mark as Story translation*

And they entered into Capernaum. And immediately on the Sabbath he entered into the synagogue and began teaching. And people were astounded by his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority and not like the legal experts. And immediately in their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit. And it screamed out, saying, "What do you have against us, Jesus Nazarene? Did you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the holy one of God." And Jesus rebuked it, saying, "Shut up, and get out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing the man and crying in a loud cry, came out of him. And everyone was so astonished that they were arguing among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority? He gives orders even to the unclean spirits and they obey him." And the report about him immediately went out everywhere, into the whole countryside of Galilee.

So far in this story of Jesus's ministry as told in the Gospel of Mark, we have seen Jesus *get ready* for ministry in his baptism by John. We have seen him *set* the things in place that he would need in his calling followers – followers and supporters, followers and leaders. And now, we see the "go" time – when the *action* of his ministry begins in full force.

As we are reading and learning about Jesus's ministry, we are always asking that question – where are *we* in the story? What does it say to us today? What does it say about what Jesus cared about and how Jesus lived, so that we can learn what *we* should care about, how *we* should live?

Last week, on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, I attended the community All People's Breakfast hosted at Colorado College, put on by *several* organizations in town, including the Pikes Peak Justice & Peace Commission, the NAACP, The Colorado Springs Independent Newspaper, and several others. The El Pomar Sports Center was full – there weren't enough chairs for everyone who came, and a couple dozen folks had to sit up in the balcony.

This event was about community. It was about celebrating the diversity among us, and believe me, I have *never* seen such diversity of ethnicity all gathered together in one place in Colorado Springs.

The last event of the breakfast was, I believe, the most important one. It was 'Table Topics Discussion' – after all the presentations, and the soul-stirring talk, and the choir, and the drummers, it was time to turn our chairs back to one another and *talk*. Each table had a facilitator and a topic important to our community assigned to it, and I felt like I had landed in a pot of good luck when I found out that my table's topic was Mental Health.

Mental Health *is* one of the most important topics in our community, on whatever level you look at it. It affects everyone – from those living on the streets to those living by the Broadmoor, from children to elders, military to civilian, pastors and congregations. If an individual has never personally struggled with mental illness in some form, I bet that individual is at least connected to someone who has.

At our table, folks spoke about their connections to mental illness – a lady next to me spoke about trying to manage her bipolar disease and her anxiety; I spoke about my family's support of one of my uncles who has schizophrenia and Asperger's. We talked about how much mental illness is stigmatized, and how much we all wanted to be a part of just *talking* about it, so that it's not something shameful, but something to be supported and cared for.

In this first story of Jesus's ministry, we also see Jesus going to a community event – he goes to service in the local synagogue, and begins teaching. And in this synagogue, it is reported, there is a man with an unclean spirit. That spirit starts screaming at Jesus – "what do you want? Did you come to destroy us?" And he pronounces him the holy one of God. Jesus responds, be quiet, and get out of him.

There are a couple things to note in this story –

First – The description is of "the man with an unclean spirit." These are two separate entities. One can be removed from the other, one's actions can be separated from the other's actions.

Second – This unclean spirit is already in the synagogue, a place of God, a place of worship.

I wish that mental illness were as easy as someone “speaking with authority” to remove from a person. Like the cartoon sheep on the bulletin cover – sometimes it seems like exorcism would solve all kinds of problems, from eradicating the demons that plague us to doing the evangelism that can be oh-so-hard for us. It would be easy if abhorrent behavior that doesn’t fit in with the morality of society, and every small behavior that doesn’t fit within normal, acceptable behavior, could be attributed to an “unclean spirit” that *could be* separated from the person herself.

But it’s not that easy, and instead we as a society and as a Christian people must wrestle with the fact that each and every individual is *complicated*. Each and every individual has pieces to them that do not fit in to the acceptable norms of society.

Even though *every single person* has something about them that may not be deemed “acceptable”, there is still incredible stigma over the things that we can’t even control. Things like addiction, or depression, or bipolar, or schizophrenia. These are things that cannot simply be exorcised. That are *complicated* – is the disease part of the person’s personality, or is it wholly separate from the person? I don’t know.

But at the very least, we know that people have been wrongly ostracized for things that they *could not control* for a long, long time.

Mental illness – something that can harm the person who has it, and harm others as well, depending on the illness. Because of fear, because of not knowing how to manage these illnesses, we have isolated those who suffered from mental disease.

**I want the church to be a place where the community comes to hear words spoken with authority, and to see actions that exorcise the biggest unclean spirits in *all of us* – that of stigma and fear.**

Even if mental illness today is not an “unclean spirit” that can easily be exorcised and separated from the person it preys upon, the worst effects of it can often be removed through *support* and *care*.

### **Eric Atcheson story**

Two years ago, a Disciples pastor named Eric Atcheson wrote a blog post in response to an event, and I'd like to share some of his post with you. He writes,

*Beginning at the age of 14, I began having increasingly frequent thoughts of suicide. I became socially withdrawn, flunked out of advanced algebra, and by the time I graduated, I had been suspended from school twice for fighting.*

*After months of refusing, I eventually caved to my parents' wish to take me to see a psychiatrist. He was able to immediately diagnose me with major clinical depression, and he put me on a regimen of antidepressants that I have continued in some form or fashion to this day. Today, I am medicated and I am well, but I still remember how much I underachieved during my teenage years.*

*I remember it because even on medication, those episodes still return in minor forms. Depression is like any chronic disease--I cannot be cured of it, I can only manage it. I will likely be medicated for the rest of my life.*

*And I'm okay with that. That's the way it has to be in order for me to function.*

*But it also isn't something that, for obvious reasons, I ordinarily share with people.*

*I'm writing about it right now, though, because Matthew Warren, the youngest son of Rick Warren (yes, that Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback and Purpose-Driven Life fame, and whom (full disclosure) I have occasionally [criticized](#) on the blog) killed himself [this weekend](#) after a lifelong battle with mental illness.*

*Matthew was twenty-seven years old.*

*It is how old I am.*

*Believe me, it hit home.*

*I worry that people sometimes rush to judge a suicide because of our own Christian orthodoxy that it constitutes a grave sin. And I understand the logic behind that--I forget who said it, but suicide is our way of telling God, "Screw you, you can't fire me. I quit."*

*We aren't supposed to quit on God.*

*But if we take a step back, and remember that depression is a mental illness, suicide becomes apparent as the result of terminal depression. Roughly 3.5% of people in the United States who have depression eventually will commit suicide. If we were to see depression as the disease that it is, it would be like saying that 3.5% of all cases of this disease become terminal.*

*Depression is not a moral failing.*

*It sounds simple, but I'm going to repeat it: Depression. Is. Not. A. Moral. Failing.*

*It is a disease. ..."<sup>1</sup>*

Eric goes on to describe the implications and consequences of thinking of depression and other mental illness as a moral failing, something like giving in to Satan, or at the very least not trusting God enough. But it is NOT a moral failing, and whenever we imply that someone can get rid of it themselves, we are cutting them off from community. Eric says, *"I'm not suggesting that making personal struggles with mental illness more public is the way to go--as a PK (pastor's kid), Matthew likely already had more burdens growing up than your average boy. And it is saddening that, based on Rick's statement, Matthew had been receiving treatment and it had ultimately failed. What I am suggesting, though, is that maybe people might one day feel more free to explain their depression to people if they wish, rather than suffering mostly in private. After all, a big part of what helps heal a person is the other people around them--medical staff, family, friends, and fellow patients."*

**The synagogue in our story in Mark was a place that Jesus came to gather with community and teach, and to gather with community and help to heal it. Again, for us today, who must learn from Jesus and hear how we should live - I want the church to be a place where the community comes to hear words spoken with authority, and to see actions that exorcise *our* unclean spirits of stigma and fear.**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://revericatcheson.blogspot.com/2013/04/we-are-legion-part-iii-of-iv.html>

Jesus began the action of his ministry by *teaching*, and then by healing. In our ministry that follows Christ, we, too, often need to start the healing through *teaching* – through education, and removal of stigma and fear. Learn about mental illness and mental health, and learn how you can support those who are trying to manage it, as well as how to support the *caregivers* of those with mental illness. Work to remove stigma, and care for any who are suffering from the disease, including yourself if applicable. And learn about the organizations in town that we can turn to for help – to our local NAMI office – the National Alliance on Mental Illness; AspenPointe; Mental Health First Aid. And hopefully, we, too can be a place that supports and cares for any suffering from mental illness.

The synagogue is a place that hosts both Jesus, the model human being, *and* the unclean spirit. Each of us, who are gathered in *this* place of worship, are not one or the other, but have elements of *both* perfection and imperfection in us. And the church is a meeting place for all of us, and not just a meeting place, but where all can flourish and experience God's love and transformative grace.

Amen.