Jesus and A World of Hurt
Thoughts on Mental Illness

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What do these folk have in common?

- Astronaut Buzz Aldrin,
- the musical genius Ludwig von Beethoven,
- the football quarterback Terry Bradshaw,
- Winston Churchill,
- the singer Judy Collins,
- Monica Seles the tennis pro
- Abraham Lincoln.

In Mark 1:21-28 we find Jesus teaching at a synagogue in Capernaum. The crowds are astounded at his teaching, comparing him to the Scribes, the scholarly elite who are experts in the teaching and interpretation of religious texts, particularly the Torah. These Scribes speak with authority. Jesus speaks with a kind of authority the Scribes don't have.

As if the teaching weren't big enough news, Mark relates in some detail this scene: A man with what the writer calls an "unclean spirit" interrupts Jesus teaching. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus scolds the spirit, telling it to "Be silent, and come out of him!" The spirit convulses and comes out of the man. The crowds are even more amazed. Jesus' words have *real* authority.

People like this man with an "unclean spirit" are often called "demoniacs" in the New Testament. (That phrase appears some 14 times in the Gospels). To be a demoniac is to have an unspecified illness. It is often associated with blindness, violence, Epilepsy, being tormented, or madness.

I want to take an imaginative leap here. I want to ask a touchy question. Do you think the writer is describing people who have mental illness? In the New Testament, there is no term for mental illness, but those words seem to me to capture part of what is going on in this scene. And in the New Testament—as in modern times—mental illness is, at the very least, an interruption. Polite people then and now often don't want to talk about it. We avoid talking about mental illness and we avoid people who have mental illness.

Neely Simpson felt that way about her Aunt Nan. Nan suffered from bipolar disorder compounded by PTSD from an abusive marriage. Nan was known to go missing for months, remembering very little about her absence. Neely wrote these words after Nan's suicide at the age of 62:

> *One night when I was an infant, Nan came to visit. My mother noticed that there was something off about her and woke late in the night hearing a voice in the kitchen. When she went to investigate, she found Nan sitting at the kitchen table talking to people who weren't there. My mother marks that as the beginning. The beginning of a lifetime spent cycling in and out of mental hospitals; the beginning of repeated disappearances and missing person reports; the beginning of calls from the police saying that they'd found Nan nude behind a restaurant, walking barefoot in the rain down the middle of a busy Charlotte road, or locked in a gas station bathroom face down and unconscious, miles from home.*

Once, when I was five years old, she disappeared for 3 months and was eventually found living out of her car in Charleston. She was often mistaken for a homeless person.

Neely admits that relating to Aunt Nan was difficult for her and for her family:

My mother called her every day. I tried to call her once a week, when she wasn't missing or in a mental hospital, but I didn't follow through all the time. The truth was she could be hard to talk to. The truth was she made me uncomfortable. The truth was that her life was sad and it frightened me. The truth was that deep down I was desperately afraid of becoming her. So, I relegated her to a place in the periphery of my life.

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Mental illness frightens us and befuddles us. When we talk about it—as I'm daring to do now—we often run the risk of being patronizing. Our thoughtful talk sometimes isn't thoughtful at all. And instead of bearing light, we generate smoke.

I don't want to further marginalize those who struggle with mental illness or their families; at one time or another, that number probably includes us. No matter how much we say we care, and no matter how badly we may fumble expressing that care (like now?), people with mental illness often say that they feel misunderstood and unreachable.

BUT IN CAPERNAUM, a man with an unclean spirit called out to Jesus, "I know who you are." And Jesus looked at him and knew who he was, too. *You are a beloved child of God. You are the apple of God's eye. You are more than your disease. Illness, come out of this man!*

And it did. The illness came out of him. The man was made well.

When this man with an unclean spirit ranted and raved in Capernaum, it's a safe bet people avoided him. But one day, Jesus saw him and didn't turn the other way. Jesus didn't pretend not to notice. Jesus didn't revile this man. Jesus didn't ignore this man. Jesus simply healed him.

The crowds are right: *Jesus speaks with authority*.

The people named at the top of this sermon have many things in common. One thing is this: they are alleged to have each struggled with mental illness. They suffered from what Churchill called visits from the "black dog"—depression. They suffered from social anxiety and bipolar disorder, bulimia, and alcoholism and other substance abuse disorders.

But—thank God—in every case, these men and women were blessed with a community that saw them as more than their illness. They were seen for their talents, humor, quirkiness, brilliance, strength, and their humanity. Somebody loved them even though their "demons" (New Testament language) or "brain chemistry" (modern language) sometimes made it difficult to love them. Somebody loved them anyway.

That's the first miracle at Capernaum: Jesus stopped, noticed, and had compassion. The healing is another miracle, but the *first* miracle is that Jesus paused and loved in the first place.

And that's the miracle that God has given us the power to perform. We can stop. We can pay a moment's attention. We can be healers if not on the front line, like Jesus, then from the periphery, like my friend Neely.

I can't cure mental illness. I can't make the troubles go away, or anxieties evaporate. But I can do my small part, likely Neely did with Aunt Nan—on the periphery. I can pay closer attention to the one who spoke with authority in Capernaum, the one who stopped, who didn't run away, who took some time . . . to love. I can, by God's grace, follow Jesus' example.

Jesus still speaks in the synagogues, in the churches, on the streets. Could it be, that by God's grace, people still hear Jesus' words in our voice? The feel Jesus' love with our expressions of friendship? In a world of hurt, could it be that Jesus invites us in God's name to touch the world's hurt with healing in our hands, with power in our voices, with justice on our minds, and love in our hearts?

I think so.