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Sermons : I'd Like to Hear a Sermon About: Mental Illness in the Gospels

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By Anna Pinckney Straight on August 2, 2015 | News by the same author

"I'd like to hear a sermon about: Mental Illness in the Gospels"

preached by Anna Pinckney Straight for University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill August 2, 2015

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Mark 5: 1 - 20

1They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. 2 And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. 3 He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain;

4 for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength

to subdue him. 5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. 6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; 7 and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." 8 For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" 9 Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." 10 He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11 Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; 12 and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." 13 So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

14 The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. 15 They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. 16 Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. 17 Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. 18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. 19 But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." 20 And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Mark 3: 13 - 21

13 He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. 14 And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, 15 and to have authority to cast out demons. 16 So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); 18 and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Then he went home; 20 and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."

"I'd like to hear a sermon about mental illness in the gospels." It is a wonderful sermon suggestion. Thank you to the person who made it.

Because, consider this data gathered by the National Alliance on Mental Illness:[1] Approximately 18.6% of adults experiences mental illness in a given year. Approximately 20% of youth aged 13 - 18 live with a mental health condition. Approximately 75% all chronic mental illness begins by the age of 24; Approximately 19% of adults over the age of 65 are affected in some way by depression

May 2012	I suspect that there's not a single person in this room who isn't affected by this topic.
April 2012	There is, of course, one complication. Mental illness isn't discussed in the gospels, or in the Bible.
March 2012	In the first century, there was no language for depression or schizophrenia. No bipolar or PTSD.
February 2012	Did it exist? Most certainly. But these wasn't a concept or language for it.
January 2012	
December 2011	But people knew when something was different. When someone wasn't behaving "normally."
November 2011	And when Jesus is sending his disciples out to heal people of their demons, his family comes to get him because, as is translated, "He must be out of his mind." [2] Or, translated another way, he is beside himself. Away from his senses.
October 2011	
September 2011	Possession is the language Mark uses to describe the man Jesus meets when arrives at the Gerasenes. [3] Demonic possession.
August 2011	
July 2011	Was the man suffering from a mental illness? We can't know for sure. But what we do know is that whatever his affliction, it has led forced isolation. He lives in a place known for its loneliness. Apart from community, with no remedy. Justly or un-justly, he is feared by the townspeople.
June 2011	
May 2011	
April 2011	And that's where, I have to say, if this man in Mark is suffering from a mental illness, maybe things haven't changed as much as we'd like to think.
March 2011	Because.
February 2011	Even in 2015, there are still churches that proclaim that those suffering from mental conditions are possessed by demons, or who aren't praying hard enough, who don't consider mental illness to be an illness.
January 2011	
December 2010	It was just ten years ago that a celebrity went on national television disputing the wisdom of using anti-depressants to treat post-partum depression, and the topic was, actually, considered debatable. [4]
November 2010	A study done just a few years ago found that almost 50% of protestant pastors referenced mental health from the pulpit less than once a year. [5]
October 2010	I recently read a book entitled <u>Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission.</u> [6]
September 2010	In it, the author, the daughter of a pastor, the daughter of a mother with severe mental illness writes of her own experience in the church, an experience I've heard echoed far too often.
August 2010	
July 2010	"Throughout the journey, we have been in the church. The church has been, for the most part, either oblivious or a silent observer, solidly placed in the part of our lives where people don't understand and where we pretend everything is fine." [7]
June 2010	
May 2010	Or the words of one father, whose son diagnosed as bipolar said, "He would go the ninetieth mile not to expose himself as bipolar. Because then, al of a sudden, all of people's caricatures come into play. And they start to wonder <i>Oh, are you going to, like, start jumping up and down and go crazy?....</i> That created loneliness and needs to be exposed. You need to speak it; you need to talk about it." [8]
April 2010	
March 2010	
February 2010	We need to talk about it, but Amy Simpson, in her research, found that only 12.5% of those diagnosed with a mental illness reported that they talked about it openly at church in a healthy way. Most preferred to keep it a secret or extremely private. [9]
January 2010	
December 2009	That's understandable, given people fears and assumptions. The stigma that still, very much exists.
November 2009	
October 2009	And the complicated nature of mental illness itself. No two diagnoses are the same. No two situations will require the same kind of care.
September 2009	
August 2009	And, as one pastor said, we're good at the short-term emergency, but "We don't have a lot of endurance to walk with people who struggle with mental illness....." [10]
July 2009	
June 2009	I am certain that there are many who hear the story of this man of Gerasenes and find not a mystery but a companion.
May 2009	Can't we, as a church, as people of faith, do better?
April 2009	Can't we find new ways of affirming and living that it's okay if your life is messy? that, as one neuroscientist put it, "it's not a sin to be sick"? [11] that this kind of ministry is not quickly resolved and requires new and different ways of caring?
March 2009	
February 2009	
January 2009	We can. We find an example of how in the same passage from the gospel of Mark.
All Archives	As I preached this past February when another one of the demon possession stories from Mark the lectionary text for the day (written by Professors Bruce J. Malian and Richard L. Rohrbaugh): [12]

Contact Us

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In the contemporary world we view disease as a malfunction of the organism which can be remedied... in the ancient Mediterranean... *Illness [was]* – a disvalued state of being in which social networks have been disrupted and meaning lost.... Freeing a person from demons, therefore, implied not only exorcising the demon but restoring that person to a meaningful place in the community as well.

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8:30-4:30 Monday-Friday

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Worship Service Info

When the man with the demons arrives back at his right mind[13], what does Jesus do?
He sends him back to community.
It is his healing.

And when he goes to tell his story? He is met not by fear or expulsion, but amazement.[14]
The word for amazement, ironically, also indicates an out-of-mind experience,
but this one is a decidedly positive.

Maybe the hearers would have, maybe we will recognize that these two ways of
being out-of-our-minds (language even used to describe Jesus)
serve as a sign of what we have in common, rather than what might be different?

It is much more in line with the more positive accounts, (also found in Amy Simpson's book):
"When Monica's daughter was in residential treatment, a woman at church told her she and her family were praying
for her daughter every day. Their family had a Christmas tradition of drawing a name, keeping it on their table and
praying every day for that person. That year they had drawn her daughter's name. This woman had no idea that
Monica's daughter was in treatment of even that she wasn't living at home. When Monica shared with her all that
was going on, she became a supportive, understanding, and kind friend in the church." [15]

Or consider this: Where did I get the book referenced so many times in this sermon? From University Presbyterian
Church's own Mental Health Task Force, formed several years ago to do exactly this: shine light on the path
towards a community that deals more honestly with issues of mental health and mental illness.

You don't have to look very far beyond our doors to find the organization Faith Connections.[16]

Faith Connections began with a few individuals at a church in Chapel Hill helping to stop the stigma of mental
illness and battle the sense of isolation and rejection. They offer conferences, classes for family and friends of
those with mental illness, and monthly seminars. This past month the topic was "Mental Illness: Caring for
Children and Youth in Our Congregations." [17]

Twenty-five years ago, when needed the help of a therapist for the first time,
I was embarrassed.
I thought I was weak to need the help.
I told only a few people, and I swore them to secrecy.

Over the years I've learned (from people wiser than I)
that seeking out that kind of help isn't a sign of weakness,
it's a strength.
Maintaining my mental health is a part of a larger wellness regimen.

These days, the place where I go for my regular mental health check-ins is
in a complex where many psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers
have their offices.

Inevitably (Chapel Hill being a small place) I see people I know.
When that happens, I don't hide or look away.
I take a deep breath, look them in the eye, hold out my hand and say,
"Hello, I'm so glad you're here. This is a good thing we're doing."

Not a single person has failed to shake my hand and meet my eye.

Friends. Brothers and sisters.
Those of us who experience mental illness, personally or the illness of someone we love.
We need to be braver in learning to speak about it,
to be honest about it,
to be real about our lives.

Be brave, courageous enough to admit when you are struggling
with a mental health issue, and ask for help,
whether that help is therapy or medication or a combination of the two.

And, when we are fortunate enough to be on the receiving end of that conversation
in which someone shares such a thing,
be brave enough to respond, not with fear, solutions, or withdrawal,
but with open hands and hearts ready to hang in there for the long haul.

In a few minutes we will celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's supper,
and there may be no better example for what this is all about.
Gathering in response to Jesus' invitation,

This is the table where we gather as children of God,
Disciples of Jesus Christ,
The body of Christ.

At this table we are nourished by the One who was,
once upon a time,
described as out-of-his-mind.

Who came to tell us about the love of God-
from which nothing can separate us.

For that's what the kingdom of God looks like.
Not only a place where someone who has been isolated is welcomed back,
but a place where they never had to leave in the first place.
Amen.

[1] <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers#sthash.Ft7dieFl.dpuf>

[2] <http://biblehub.com/greek/1839.htm>

Mark 3:21 V-AIA-3S

GRK: γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη

NAS: of Him; for they were saying, *He has lost His senses.*

KJV: they said, *He is beside himself.*

INT: indeed *He is out of his mind*

[3] It might should be noted that the geography and time-line don't match up. The Gerasenes wasn't a coastal community, leading to questions about the accuracy of this text. The geography, of course, isn't the point. The point is to shine a light on Jesus' power and ability. This man's demons and his restoration to community serve as a way to illuminate more about Jesus. The items I discuss today from this passage are important in the text, but it should be noted that they are not the central point.

[4] http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/01/opinion/war-of-words.html?_r=0

[5] <http://www.lifewayresearch.com/2014/09/22/mental-illness-remains-taboo-topic-for-many-pastors/>

[6] Simpson, Amy. Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission. (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2013).

[7] Simpson, 28-29.

[8] Simpson, 74.

[9] Simpson, 101.

[10] Simpson, 113.

[11] Camp, Ken. "Through a glass darkly: churches struggle to respond to people with mental illness." *Family and Community Ministries* 23, no. 4 (2010 2010): 24-27. *ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost* (accessed July 27, 2015).

[12] <http://books.google.com/books?id=xxOGViLco-UC&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false> Pages 368, 350. Found in Brian Stoffregen's exegesis of this passage <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark1x29.htm>

[13] <http://biblehub.com/greek/4993.htm>

sóphroneó: to be of sound mind, i.e. to be temperate

[14] <http://biblehub.com/greek/1611.htm>

ekstasis: a displacement (of the mind), i.e. bewilderment, ecstasy

[15] Simpson, 133.

[16] <http://www.faithconnectionsonmentalillness.org>

[http://www2.nami.org/MSTemplate.cfm?](http://www2.nami.org/MSTemplate.cfm)

Section=FaithNet_NAMI1&Site=FaithNet_NAMI&Template=/MSTemplate.cfm?

Section=FaithNet_NAMI1&Site=FaithNet_NAMI&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=66&ContentID=33925μs

[17] <http://www.faithconnectionsonmentalillness.org/meetingsprograms.html>

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About the Author



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Bio:

Born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina (with UNC-CH grads for parents), Anna Pinckney Straight was the sixth generation of her family to join Second Presbyterian Church. After graduating from Agnes Scott College in 1993, Anna journeyed north to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York City, receiving her Master of Divinity degree in 1996. Her first congregation was in Arthurdale, West Virginia, and then in 2001 she moved to Greencastle, Pennsylvania, a small town just north of Maryland. Both of these calls were as solo Pastors. In 2006, on a whim, she replied to an advertisement for an associate pastor position at here University Presbyterian Church, and was terrified to find out that she might, in fact, be called to return south. Terrified, that is, until she traveled to Chapel Hill and met with the search committee, when she wisely began to celebrate the wisdom of this wonderful call. In November of 2006 Anna moved to Chapel Hill with her family (husband, daughter, dogs, cats, and fish). She completed her Doctor of Ministry degree at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. and graduated in May of 2007. At UPC Anna works in the general area of pastoral care. She visits, welcomes new members, works with the Deacons,