

*Lord, open our ears to hear your Word spoken to us;  
Open our hearts to be changed by Your Spirit. Amen.*

How many of us have lived with chronic mental illness,  
either in ourselves or someone we're close to?

By mental illness I mean severe depression requiring hospitalization;  
disabling anxiety; psychotic behaviors; severe addictions.

I'm lumping these all together – often the addiction is secondary to the illness.

And by chronic, I mean it doesn't seem to get better –

there are cycles of wellness and cycles of relapse, and often manipulative  
interactions and promises of new medications and choices and non-choices...

After awhile, we no longer see the person; we see their illness.

And we don't think they're ever going to get better.

I had a parishioner who suddenly went into a depression so deep she was nearly  
catatonic. When I visited her in the hospital, she couldn't even speak to me.

But I felt full of faith, and I prayed with her each time I visited, taking her to the  
chapel, reminding her of her connection to Jesus – and she came out of it.

The doctors had said there was nothing they could do; her husband had resigned  
himself – but she came back to life and is fully engaged in living again.

Once I was at a community event in Stamford, and heard someone call my name.

During a period when my church in Stamford had an active healing ministry

among people who were homeless, there was a woman who used to come to  
our monthly healing service and my weekly bible study at the Women's Shelter –  
and it took awhile to realize how profoundly mentally ill she was.

She became more and more paranoid –

and ultimately left the shelter and was found by police sleeping in bushes.

Here she was, calling to me. I didn't even recognize her.

She told me she is now at Laurel House and working as a Nurse's Assistant,  
and an active member at First Congregational Church.

I thought she was a lost cause, and here she was, seated and in her right mind.

The people of the Ten Towns had long since given up on helping the man in our

story today. In fact, he had ceased to exist as a person and was just a problem.

And they threw everything they had at containing him.

Most people have a particular way of approaching those we deem mentally ill – we feel afraid and helpless, so we may edge away, or seek to isolate the person.

We may seek to incarcerate them for our own safety – and maybe theirs.

Nowadays, we often drug them out of any semblance of who they are.

What we often do not do is pray for them to be released from their bondage and made whole again. We don't think it's possible.

That's not how Jesus saw it – he saw the person locked in by the demonic forces, or the mental illness, or the social deviance, whatever it may have been – and he sent strength to that real person, to build up his true self.

He didn't define the person by his disease, but by his status as a child of God.

What Jesus sees is who we are, not what we are possessed by.

In the story we heard today, the man is possessed by demons, many of them.

The world of the New Testament is very open to the possibility of spiritual forces of evil, beyond mental or physical illness.

This man has too many to count, "Legion."

He is so far gone as to barely have any "self" left.

The same could be said if he was advanced in mental illness

or far gone into an addiction – the point comes where you have no will left to choose the good, the wholesome, the life-giving.

But Jesus doesn't confuse this man with his disease. He aligns his power and strength with his true self – and begins to lead him into freedom.

The transformation is so complete, so powerful, that Luke tells us the people of the region were terrified. Wasn't a good day for the pigs either. That didn't help.

But the fear is at the power they see in Jesus.

That day the man is set free from a life of torture and degradation –

his demons and voices are gone, and he can begin to hear his own voice again.

And the One voice of the Spirit of God.

I was thinking about this: when someone says they hear voices,

we diagnose them; if someone says they hear God, we honor their faith.

We seek to set people free from possession by evil forces, but encourage people to be possessed by the Spirit of God. What is the difference?

The biggest difference is that the forces of evil seek to degrade and destroy a person's self, to break that person down – we see dis-integration in the mentally ill.

Like a cell vulnerable to attack by cancerous cells, the person's self becomes permeable, penetrable; their boundaries are porous and they have no peace. There is not one voice but many, and their message is destructive not upbuilding.

When God is speaking, there is only one voice.

In the maelstrom of input and sensory data in which we live;

in the multiplicity of messages we have internalized and play back to ourselves, in the midst of all this talk, God's voice is a still point, a clarity, a simplicity.

As we invite the Spirit of Christ to take us over –

we learn to tune our hearts to the frequency of Jesus' voice in us, directing us, blessing us, reminding us of our belovedness when we act less than loving.

As we allow Christ to fill us, our selves are strengthened, for God delights in the uniqueness of each one of us, created in God's image, and yet no two alike.

We are all possessed by something – but we can choose to be possessed by the God whose possession we already are. That man wasn't left empty that day – he was filled with God's Spirit when the demons were gone.

We have the privilege of inviting God to take up more space in us.

To make time and space for God's Spirit to dwell, to abide, to heal and transform.

The more space we make for God in us, the less power the negative voices have.

However much room the Holy Spirit takes up in us,

there's less room for the negative, the hurtful, the harmful, the wrong.

And then, out of our healed wounds, God can bring healing to others.

And then we become willing agents of healing for others, for the world.

That man, once he was set free, wanted to follow Jesus, to come with him.

And Jesus – Jesus who so often said, "Follow me," now says

"No. Stay here. Go home to your friends. Tell your community how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

And that's what he did, all over the Ten Cities. *"...and everyone was amazed."*

This man obeyed Jesus and became one of the first witnesses to the Gentiles.

That makes him an apostle, by my book.

This homeless, crazed, bleeding, frightening lunatic becomes an apostle.

Man, what does suggest to us, sitting here, "clothed and in our right minds?"

If he's an apostle...

imagine what we can be as we choose to give God more space in us.

*Amen.*

**Mark 5:1-20**

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; 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. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; 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.' For he had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.' 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 lake, and were drowned in the lake.

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. 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. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. 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.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.