

June 7, 2015
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
Mark 3:20-35

Seeing the Struggle with Mental Illness

In the 2001 movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, Russell Crowe plays John Nash, a gifted mathematician struggling with schizophrenia. The movie made a big impression on me, first of all, because it was shot on location at Princeton University while I was attending seminary next door. And we were so excited about all the Hollywood equipment around town and we couldn't wait to share our stories of movie star sightings. But the movie itself also made a deep impression on me. It portrayed a brilliant man, John Nash, who begins seeing things; code words embedded in newspapers; government conspiracies and spies around every corner. The FBI sends agents to speak with him constantly. And we as the audience are as convinced as he is that what he sees is real and then, spoiler alert, we find out that none of it is. We are as shocked as John Nash is. And suddenly very aware of what it is like to live with mental illness. We understand the confusion. And the fear that you are losing control. And the shame of being mocked and whispered about. And the heartbreak of loved ones. And the loneliness and the isolation. We see

life for someone with a serious mental illness in a way that we have never seen it before.

I wonder if that's what it was like for Jesus. I wonder if that's what happened to Jesus and to his family when people started whispering that he had lost it, that he had gone crazy, that he had lost touch with reality.

I wonder if Jesus experienced the same frustration and shame and isolation as everyone started whispering: "Have you heard about Jesus? Oh my, it's such a pity. His little movement has gotten out of control with the exorcisms and the huge frenzied crowds that come to see him. He has gone out of his mind." The news reached Mary, so she and the family went to restrain him.

They said he was out of his mind. He was acting crazy, nuts. How else could they explain it? He was casting out demons. Healing lepers and paralytics. Eating with tax collectors and sinners. Saying strange things. Inappropriate things. The religious authorities had noticed too. Jesus was telling the huge crowds gathered around him that the rules no longer applied. That religious fasting and Sabbath keeping and purity rules were optional. He told the people their sins were forgiven. He told the

religious leaders they were wrong about God, which made them madder than hornets. He was saying things you shouldn't say. He was doing things you shouldn't do. He was 'out of his mind.' And when word reaches his family, they come, worried and embarrassed, in order to take him home so that he can be out of his mind more privately.

It seems being out of your mind carried the same social stigma in Jesus' time as it does today. Today if people think you are out of your mind, if you have a mental illness, you can expect everyone to talk. You can expect they will treat you with suspicion and fear. You can expect they will shame you and mock you. So those dealing with mental illnesses quickly learn not to bring it up. They learn to keep quiet when others say inaccurately that it is their fault. Or their mother's fault. Or their father's fault. Or how it is contagious. Or how violent it makes you. Those struggling with mental illness learn to hide it. They hide it from their families, their friends. They can't talk to anyone about it. Even in church. Especially in church. Because God would not approve. So, the individuals and families struggling with mental illness often struggle alone.

It is a struggle we often do not see. And what we do not see and what we do see, that's what we will be talking about this summer. How we look at the world with the eyes of our hearts. How our spiritual vision is, at times, imperfect and we see through a mirror dimly. And how God, in Jesus Christ, gives us new eyes to see. How God heals the eyes of our hearts. And how we learn to see in Christ; that the least are the greatest. The last are first. That our enemies can be our friends. That death is not the end, but the beginning. In Christ, we learn not to put our faith in what CAN be seen, but in what cannot be seen, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians. And we are always asking God to help us see the world as God sees it.

Our scripture today from the gospel of Mark presents us with an issue that we don't look at often. We don't bring to it eye level because it's uncomfortable and painful and not nice to discuss in polite company.

But mental illness is something that many people struggle with and they struggle alone. In Mark's gospel, Jesus sees that. He sees those around him struggling with demons. He sees the outcast and the odd, and he thinks they are worth his time. He thinks they were worth God's time.

And the world thinks Jesus is crazy for believing that. And what struck me for the first time when I read this passage was that the world thought Jesus was out of his mind. They thought he was mentally ill. And that made me think that if Jesus was described as mentally ill then, then that puts him in solidarity with all those with mental illnesses. And perhaps it should put us in solidarity with them too.

It think it's important for us to see this issue. First, let's look at some facts. Mental illness affects lots of people. About a quarter of American adults, that's one in four, have a diagnosable mental disorder. That's our friend or our neighbor or our family member dealing with mild depression or an emotionally unstable parent or a child with attention deficit disorder. And these people have learned to cope so you would never know. And then there are those with serious mental illnesses. About 6% or 1 in 20 adults have them. And that includes your coworker whose child has autism, your friend who is severely depressed, your cousin who struggles with anorexia, the man down the street with PTSD. Your sister's best friend who is bipolar. Your boss's son who is schizophrenic. The vast majority of those with serious mental illnesses

pose no threat to anyone. They have found a way to function with medication and therapy. They have found a way to make it through life. So we might think that there is no issue at all. Six percent of the population, well, that's really not all that many people. And besides, there is help for those who really need it.

That's what I always assumed. That there were resources for those with serious mental illnesses. I assumed there were still state hospitals like in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. But most of those have closed because they were not always humane or safe. And the mental health centers that the government said it would build in the 60s and 70s are nearly non-existent. Many families are ill-equipped and there is little therapeutic support. So people stop taking their medications. They turn to alcohol and drugs. They cannot find a job or a place to live and so become homeless. It is estimated that 20-25% of the homeless population has a serious mental illness. More and more of them are ending up in prison. Incarceration has become the widespread response to mental illness. Today, more than half of the people in prison have

some kind of mental health problem. And prisons are in no way equipped to provide for these psychiatric needs.

Unaddressed mental illness contributes to over-filled prisons. It compounds addiction issues. Suicide rates for those with mental illnesses are much higher. It impacts our communities, our law enforcement, our taxes, our schools. Our children. Our friends. Our loved ones. Mental illness presents hardships like nothing else. Medical coverage becomes tricky. Employment becomes shaky. If the police get involved, it gets even more complicated. Stress is multiplied exponentially. And THEN add to that the shame and social stigma. Friends pull away. Communities are cold. Religious groups are dismissive.

So, what do we see ourselves doing? How can we as the church look at this with the eyes of Christ? First of all, we can see it. We can talk about it. We can recognize the toll that mental illness takes on our society. We can seek to understand the shame and stigma that so many live with.

Talking about it, like we are doing today, helps us see mental illness and lift it up as a real spiritual concern for God's people. We can see of how

marginalized those with mental illnesses are. We can be aware of how debilitating and exhausting it is to deal with. We can learn how to discuss mental illness with sensitivity. That's the first thing we can do. We can learn to be comfortable speaking about it and hearing about it. We can learn to communicate that God's grace is for all.

Second, we can provide hospitality and hope for people dealing it. We can be a place where it's OK. A place you can talk about mental illness and where people will listen and accept and pray with you for healing. We can offer the assurance that God doesn't give up on anyone. And that none of us have it all together. That we all need God. And that we believe each one of us is more than what's wrong with us. We are more than our illnesses or issues. No one is just mentally ill or OCD or nuts. Each of us is a person first. And we have been brought together by the same hope that God can see us and know us and love us as we are. That God looks at each of us and sees something wonderful.

Third, we can be advocates for those with mental illnesses. We are blessed by God in order to be a blessing to others. We have been given God's grace so we can share it with the world. So how do we do that?

What is do-able for us as a community? Realistically, we cannot heal every ill or solve every problem. Some things are beyond us. And we must set healthy boundaries for ourselves. But we can be part of the process of recovery. When Fred's twenty-one year old son, Andy, had his first major bipolar episode. "it was very traumatic for our whole family", he writes. "He had been training to be a missionary pilot but suddenly, he became very paranoid and delusional. We went to our pastor for support. And he said, 'Well, that's the end of his missionary career.' He didn't even offer to pray with us." Fred and his wife found another church with a mental illness support group. They learned that the biggest need for those dealing with mental illnesses is to have a friend, and a fellowship of understanding...where one feels valued, and accepted as a first-class member."

It is important for us as the church to SEE. Especially those whom the world does not want to see. And to see them with the eyes of Christ. To know that anyone with a struggle or a disease or a mental illness is worthy of God's love. To believe in the power of prayer. And the power of our hope in Jesus Christ, that each of us is created on purpose to have

a purpose. We look not at what CAN be seen, but at what cannot be seen. We believe the love of God is always at work in all of us. The love of God in Jesus Christ who casts out demons and welcomes strangers and heals the broken-hearted. Who gathers in the outcast and the exiled. And the mistaken and the misunderstood. Who says, here is my body broken for you. Here is my life given for you. For the forgiveness and healing of the world. Behold, my love poured out for you.