

February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024

## Mark 1:29-39 “Keeping Secrets”

This is the third Sunday in a row that we’ve been in Mark’s gospel and we haven’t even finished the first chapter yet, nor will we finish it this week. Yes, Mark is the shortest gospel and he’s the one who uses the word “immediately” to describe Jesus’ ministry. But look at everything that happens in a single chapter! At least Jesus tries to take a little break this week. In verse 32 Jesus is still healing and casting out demons long after the sunset. But then before the sun comes up the next morning, he’s out trying to take a little quiet time before facing the crowds again. In other words, he’s practicing good self-care by trying not to get sucked up into the “immediately” of his mission. I like how Mark emphasizes Jesus’ humanity. If you want to focus on the divine side of Jesus, John’s your go-to gospel. But Mark gives us many examples of Jesus taking time to get away and re-group. People in helping professions aren’t very good at this. We tend to run at full speed for as long as we can, and then we crash. So thank you, Gospel of Mark, for providing us with a good example to follow. When the door blows off your poorly built airplane and the cabin depressurizes *you* are supposed to put the oxygen mask on first before you try to help the person seated next to you. You’re not going to be able to help anyone unless you take care of yourself first. But as hard as any professional do-gooder tries to practice healthy self-care, it’s hard to get away from it all. Take for example our story this morning. Jesus is trying to get away. He’s practically hiding. But what are his disciples doing? Verse 36 says, “And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’” And this was thousands of years before cell phones! Jesus was in the desert, minding his own business, taking care of his needs, having some good quality time with God and what happens? His disciples “hunted for him!” I like that word. They weren’t looking for him. They weren’t just poking around to see what he was up to or to check if he was okay. “Oops! There he is. Shh. Looks like he’s praying. Let’s not disturb him!” No, they were HUNTING. “Jesus! We need you!” And we’ve had the audacity for the last two weeks to ask why

Jesus seemed like he wanted to keep his identity secret. News of Jesus' ministry was spreading. People in need of his healing touch kept flocking to him. As Peter said, "Everyone is searching for you!" There's an irony to what's happening in Jesus' ministry during this early stage. As much as Jesus keeps insisting that people keep *his* identity a secret, I can't help but notice how many of the people seeking him out have to live *their* lives in secret too.

Speaking of things that are kept secret, let's talk about mental illness. The first church I served as a senior pastor was during the early to mid-90s in a little town in the Appalachian region of Virginia called Pearisburg. It was the county seat of a three-town county. The neighboring town of Narrows was home to the Hoecht Celanese Chemical Corporation's **acetate** plant. It was the largest employer in that part of Southwest Virginia. Tex Sample wrote a book once called *Hard Living People and Mainstream Christians*. It was a guide for churches to be better equipped to minister to working-class people who many churches dismiss as "rednecks." The thing is, a lot of churches in that area already had a game plan for how to minister to these so-called "rednecks." Their strategy was to use heavy-handed theology and fear to maintain control over their congregations. Their plan was to reject or demonize anything new in the field of science or medicine that challenged their entrenched beliefs. They were anti-vaxers decades before it became whatever it is now. They were trying to ban science textbooks. They were even teaching that the anti-smoking campaign was a hoax conjured up by the devil. Did I mention that acetate fibers are what cigarette filters are made of?

I was pastor of the First Christian church in Pearisburg during a time when there were some great things happening in the treatment of mental illness. As researchers and specialists in behavioral health discovered new ways to map the human brain, they started developing new medications to treat depression, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia and other mental illnesses. The stigma of mental illness started lifting as researchers gained a better understanding of the brain's physiology and

how to treat chemical imbalances. This new understanding of mental illness didn't go over so well in many rural communities, especially with churches. The general population often thought mental illness was just an excuse for people who acted strangely to justify their behavior. Parents of children who struggled with mental illness would often say horrible things like, "There's nothing wrong with that kid that a good spanking won't cure." There were also churches who believed mental illness was akin to demon possession. That's so backwards if you think about it though. Rather than believing that what people in Biblical times understood as demon possession was probably mental illness, they turned it around and thought mental illness was demon possession. These churches told their members that you didn't need medicine, you just needed Jesus. I have to say, though, there was some good reason for folks in that part of the country to be suspicious of pharmaceutical companies. This was the early days of the opioid crisis that was running rampant in rural Virginia. Preachers were telling their flocks not to trust *any* kind of pill or vaccination. If you prayed hard enough, Jesus would heal you. Besides, according to the Bible, medicine is the same as sorcery. The problem is, they had a good argument to make because the Greek word that gets translated "sorcery" in English is "pharmacaia." But somehow, folk medicine was okay. I had a guy in the church who said that when he got a chest cold as a child his parents would have him smoke hand-rolled cigarettes with dried eucalyptus leaves mixed in with the tobacco to "cure" him. See, *that* seems like sorcery to me, but what do I know?

Let's get back to mental illness. I need to tell you about Erin (not her real name), the adult daughter of one of my church members. From the time she was little, she struggled with anxiety, depression, mood swings, and racing thoughts. She didn't do well in school. She couldn't hold down a job. She was quite attractive, but she often "settled" for guys who were abusive because she had such poor self-esteem. At the time, one of her boyfriends introduced her to Riverside Baptist Church, a popular "mega-church-wanna-be" congregation in the area. And no, I didn't change the name of the church. I only change names to protect the

innocent. Folks rarely referred to this church as “Riverside Baptist” though. They called it, “Shaun’s church” after their charismatic preacher. He spoke at the local High School’s baccalaureate service one year and told the graduates they shouldn’t go to college because they’d be in danger of losing their salvation. He convinced folks that there were demons behind every doorway and under every bush. When Erin finally found a decent psychiatric doctor, she was prescribed a mood stabilizing drug that made a world of difference in her treatment plan. When Pastor Shaun found out about this, he scolded her and said that her problem was that she was demon-possessed and that these drugs would only invite more demons.

Erin already struggled with the stigma of mental illness and now she had a so-called spiritual leader telling her that it was her own fault and that all she needed to do was pray, get right with Jesus and she’d be healed. She told this minister, “You don’t think I pray about this night and day? You don’t think I’ve asked Jesus to take this awful illness away from me?” His response was, “If that was true, you’d be healed, and we wouldn’t be here talking about this.” It took a while for me to convince her that mental illness was a “real thing” and that taking medicine to help her feel “normal” was okay. But she still struggled with the stigma of mental illness and kept it a secret. After all, look what happened to her when she opened up about it.

In Jesus’ time, demon-possessed people were ostracized from their community along with others whose illnesses rendered them ritually “unclean.” Their condition forced them to live a life of shame and secrecy not unlike Erin. When Jesus healed them, it not only made them whole, but it also released them from living in secret. They were finally able to live in community without shame or stigma. With their new lease on life and freedom from their deepest secrets, they could fully discover ways they were called to follow Jesus. You might be thinking, “You’re not making a very good argument here because it makes Pastor Shaun’s case against Erin look pretty good. These folks didn’t need drugs, Jesus healed them. Hang in there with me, okay?”

Frank Warren collects secrets as a hobby. He got this wild idea to hand out three hundred self-addressed postcards on the streets of Washington DC asking people to share a secret they had never told anyone. Frank collected many of these anonymous secrets and created the PostSecret Project, where he shared them online. Some secrets were silly. “I work at Starbucks and I give decaf to customers who are rude to me.” Some were shocking. “Everyone who knew me before 9/11 believes I’m dead.” Some were soulful. “Dear birthmother, I have great parents. I found love. I’m happy.” Some were fearful. “When people I love leave voicemails on my phone, I always save them in case they die tomorrow and I have no other way of hearing their voices again.” Some were kind. “I like to record encouraging music on CDs and leave them in people’s mailboxes.” Letting go of secrets has a way of freeing us to live into our identity, accept ourselves for who we are, and connecting us to our deepest humanity and others we have yet to meet. Frank Warren says, “The secrets I receive reflect the full spectrum of complicated issues that many of us struggle with every day: Intimacy, trust, meaning, humor, and desire. The PostSecret Project gave folks a venue where unheard voices could be heard and untold stories could be shared.”

As soon as Jesus healed Simon’s mother-in-law, she was restored to her family and community. Of course, we don’t know how serious her illness was, but I wonder what sort of possibilities opened up for her once she was healed. For the many folks who Jesus healed I wonder what joy they found in living freely and openly rather than in secret on the fringes of society. Here’s a question for you to consider -- What secrets are keeping you from living fully? Is shame keeping you in the shadows? Jesus understands and can lead us on a path to healing through a variety of models and methods including medicine. Freed from all that holds us back, we can then connect to one another and live fully in community and openness. By the way, Erin loves Jesus and is now a proud advocate for mental health and has even been involved in fundraising to have mental health services more readily available to uninsured or underinsured people in Giles County. I often tell her that by

bringing opportunities for healing in an often under-served population, that she's doing good "Jesus work."