

Unfounded Fear

Luke 8:26-39

People are funny creatures, aren't we? For those who don't know my training is in sociology and I currently work for Butte County Department of Behavioral Health as a case manager. I am generally interested in how and the *why* people choose to act and interact with one another. Sometimes I never come up with an answer. So, it is with today's scripture. Prepare to be disappointed.

This morning, we read the story of Jesus sending out demons from a man and into a herd of swine who then ran to the lake and were drowned. So much for bringing home the bacon. We have a man who we are told had demons in him: he wore no clothes, was homeless sheltering in the tombs, the cemetery, and, we can probably guess, was also more than a bit of a public nuisance to boot. It was to a point that in verse 29 that we read that for the many times this man had been seized he'd been kept under guard, so in custody, and had been bound with chains and shackles, secured and detained. We also read that he would escape, or be released, and return to his community to start the cycle all over again. Now Jesus had commanded the demons to come out of him and, as we have already covered, they were sent into a herd of swine which entered the lake and drowned.

So, what happened then? The swineherds went and told people in the city and the country of what they had witnessed. 'We don't know how it happened, but it happened!' The people came and found Jesus. They also found the man that had been cleansed, or healed, "clothed and his right mind." In short, ready to reconcile with his community and be a productive member of society. Or, at least, not a burden anymore. What was the response of this community? They asked Jesus to leave because they were afraid. They chose not to make space for Jesus. Jesus complied with their request, got back into the boat, and left. What could have been his effect on their community if they hadn't surrendered to fear?

They were afraid. Fear warns us of danger; it can be warped and become hard to control. Fear is a powerful emotion; it readies the body to retreat, to strike out, or become paralyzed. Fear can also make us irrational. If you're looking for examples of irrational, unfounded, fear just look at the news headlines, both national and international. It would take me far too long to expound on how

unfounded fear has shaped our past and continues to plague the present. Fear is something that we all feel at some point or another.

Generally we humans feel some form of fear, or anxiety, when we encounter something new, unusual, or beyond our ability to understand it. One definition of a miracle is: “a surprising and welcome event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and is therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency.” According to our reading today this community responded to a miracle and asked Jesus to leave because of their fear. Why? Why is that?

It wasn't like Jesus had a reputation for being mean or anything. (Some Pharisees excluded.) In fact, Jesus had a pretty good reputation for not only being a great teacher, but also a great healer. In the gospel of Matthew, chapter 8 starts with a leper who came to Jesus to be healed, and Jesus healed him! Asked him not to say anything about it either. In the same chapter verse five Jesus is approached by a Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant who was at his home “paralyzed, in terrible distress.” In 13 Jesus tells the centurion “‘Go, let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant was healed in that hour.” Matthew chapter 8, verse 14 Jesus enters Peter's house, saw Peter's Mother-in-law with a fever, healed her. Verse 16 “they brought to him many who were possessed by demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick!”

In the gospel of John chapter nine, verses 1 through 11 tells us of the story of Jesus healing the man who was blind from birth. Having his eyes covered in mud he bathed at Jesus' direction and his sight was restored. But of course, in the verses 13-34 the Pharisees were going to Pharisee. They were calling out the healing as it occurred on the Sabbath, questioning the identity of the man healed (is he or isn't he the same person,) even questioning, harassing, the man's parents. See the Pharisees were also afraid. Afraid of losing their power, their prestige, their command over people. Very afraid.

But let's get back to our scripture this morning. One of the things that struck me is how much demonic possession reminds me of many of the symptoms certain severe mental health disorders. It has long been my thought that ‘demonic possession’ was a way of understanding mental illness from a historical perspective. According to the National Institute of Mental Health serious mental illness (SMI) is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder resulting in

serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities.

Let's see "for a long time he had worn no clothes." Check. "He did not live in a house but in the tombs." Check. "For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds." Check. For those of us who work in behavioral health these symptoms are highly relevant. We see them every week in our parks, on our streets, and in the alleys in between. Our first responders, those police departments, those Emergency Medical Technicians, those fire fighters, those sheriff deputies, also bear witness to the severe mental illnesses of many of our unsheltered neighbors.

Some would ask why we also don't "[keep] under guard and bound with chains and shackles" our folks with severe mental illness? Sometimes we do, though it is only under the very strict guidelines of California Welfare and Institutions codes beginning with 5150, the 72 hour involuntary hold, which I assume most of you are aware of. The reason for the strict guidelines for involuntary holds is simple: They are still adults whose civil rights are fully intact. Yet, irrational, unfounded fear takes hold; many folks in our community would have those with a serious mental illness locked away.

Jesse is fond of saying "God is reconciling the world to God through Jesus Christ." One of our goals at Behavioral Health is to rehabilitate those with mental illness to be able to maintain stably in the community. This can include medication support, intensive case management, and connection to support services. We are, in essence, attempting to reconcile those with serious mental illness with the community. But let's be honest, we wouldn't turn away Jesus or those who help heal and reconcile mentally ill folks with the community. Would we?

First, let's talk about Safe Space. Safe Space, for those who don't know, operates a rotating winter shelter for those who are unsheltered. One of things they require is a check-in site to be able to meet with potential guests and take them to the shelter site to settle in for the night. Awhile ago Safe Space was able to lease the old 7-11 building at 1st and Main. It seemed ideal, walking distance of the downtown plaza, on three bus routes, off street parking, adequate power, and

storage. Yet, complaints arose about too many unsheltered people, some with serious mental illness, coming to the downtown area.

Seriously? Oh, there were the technical issues raised about appropriate permits, traffic issues, and a whole host of other details. The reality is that the Safe Space check-in site was, in my recollection, always adjacent to the downtown core. For example, that season Safe Space ended up holding their check-in site under a tent in the parking lot of Trinity United Methodist church. Seems to me that it was still adjacent to downtown. Happily, Safe Space has a new home on the Esplanade where they can do check-ins and can now offer some daytime programming. A home which is more difficult for some people to access.

Then there's the Torres Community Shelter on the south end of town. When I worked there, there wasn't a week that went by that we didn't get a call complaining about a person who may, or may not, have been staying at the shelter. It didn't matter; the shelter got the blame. Seemed to be that folks assume someone with serious mental illness is dangerous without knowing them. Talk about unfounded fear. For those who don't know the Torres Shelter is now open 24 hours a day, except for a half day on Fridays for a deep cleaning, and is also low barrier allowing for an environment better able to serve those with serious mental health and addiction issues. Also, the Genesis Pallet shelter site, around the corner from the Torres Shelter, had similar barriers placed in their way. Fortunately for the Genesis Shelter it had been mandated by court order, not the city's "compassion."

However, the one that still stings the most was the now defunct Orange Street Shelter. Never heard of it? Not surprising. It was to have been a collaboration with the Jesus Center and Safe Space. It was to have been a low barrier shelter of around 200 beds, offering onsite amenities and space for service providers, such as Behavioral Health, to connect the guests of Orange Street to services meant to address and overcome the barriers of homelessness and to be reconciled with the community. But it never came to fruition. Why was that? Unfounded fear.

On April 11, 2019, California State University, Chico, Office of the President under Gayle Hutchinson issued a statement regarding the Orange Street Shelter. I want to point out, so as not to be misleading, is that in the statement she noted "our acknowledgement of the great need for such a shelter." However, the

NIMBY fear, the unfounded fear, took over. “Although our students are young adults, for many their initial years on our campus are the first ones lived many miles away from home. To bring a vulnerable population such as those who will be the primary clients of the low barrier shelter into close proximity to student housing and other campus facilities is to introduce an element over which both our campus and our city can exercise limited control.”

Seriously? Limited control? As opposed to the several bars in the vicinity that get out of ‘limited control’ on weekend nights? As opposed to the several ‘unrecognized’ fraternities and sororities which the university also has ‘limited control’ some of which are non-compliant, had or has issues with hazing, and a few whose national headquarters are the ones to revoke their charters? I suppose that those situations are better than seeing folks working on trying to better themselves. I would, however, like to know where these young adults have lived that didn’t have unsheltered, or people with serious mental illness. Something else to think about as the Chico State statement notes “... it is the very nature of a low barrier shelter that causes our greatest concern.”

So let take a moment of thanks for those service providers who do the work. Who work with those like the man in our scripture. Lisa Currier’s Crisis, Care, Triage, and Advocacy, the Genesis Pallet Shelter, North State Shelter Team, Safe Space Winter Shelter, and the Torres Community Shelter. I leave you with a quote from Dr. Elizabeth Haydon’s fantasy novel Requiem for the Sun: “Perhaps that is all that a miracle is – faith and the knowledge of what is right in combination with [a] refusal to be deterred.”