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By Wayne J. Schneider

Silly Stigma.

St. Luke 8:26-39

The popularity of Jesus is growing and so are the crowds that follow him. Despite this, Jesus made time to be with individuals no one else would. In today's story, Jesus enters a neighborhood and the first thing he does is speak to a lonely man. The man is naked, living in a burial ground, and bound by chains. He shouts at Jesus, "What have you to do with me?!"

Immediately, Jesus commands the demons living in this man to possess a herd of pigs; and then commands the swine to run down a steep embankment into the water, and they drown. The man who had been possessed by evil was now liberated: Jesus as Savior. What better reason for celebration, right?

Not so much in some quarters. This was a small village, when word of this healing quickly became known, the people of the Gerasenes a cake for Jesus they did not bake. Nor did they give Jesus a key to the city for liberating one of its citizens. Instead, filled with fear, they told Jesus to get back in his boat and leave.

Healing people was not a new activity for Jesus, for he had healed many people of their illnesses. But, the restoration of this person was fascinating. And yet, the reaction of the people is even more captivating. Why were they fearful? What would cause them to push Jesus away following this miracle?

Through the art of psychology, we know of the pain and misery that accompanies mental health issues. Beyond the disorders themselves is the misunderstanding and ignorance, that lead people to attach stigmas to those who have these illnesses. These attached labels cause negative effects, that remove their humanness in the eyes of the ignorant. Those stigmatized can feel permanently labeled, fearful of visiting a physician or psychologist.

In today's story, this man's mental illness displays behaviors that are difficult to observe. As a result, he was locked up and locked out. The community drags him out to the graveyard, chains him, and places a guard nearby because he was 'the delegated demoniac.'

The question for today is: How often do we do the same thing to people who are different than us? How easily do we find it to slap a label on someone, and assume that they belong to a predictable and generalized group? And, why do we dehumanize people by chaining them up because of what makes them unique?

In today's story, the Gerasene community has isolated a man who was possessed of demons. They had made a diagnosis and a decision: they would ignore and confine him. They believed they solved the problem, right?

The problem is the man remained unhealed. Actually, they had worsened his condition by trying to better their own. Their label of him, his stigma, became his only identification. We do not know his real name. We know nothing about him except what divides him from other people. Jesus, however, knows that the man is more than his stigma. He is more than the difference that became what defined him. Jesus knew he could be healed.

It is easily noted that Jesus socializes with more than one social group, one gender, or one race. Jesus is never about isolation. He is about healing. He is a 'balm in Gilead,' in a world that attempts to create division.

In our story, a man went from being trapped to being freed, while a community went from contentment to anxiety. Of course, this prompts me to ask an additional question: Who is healed in this story? I believe Jesus came to heal not just the possessed man but his neighbors too. Healed from their need to control, to contain; to remain the same.

If the community needed healing it is because they are ill. Often, we see mental illness in individuals and miss it in society. How may we live out of love instead of fear of difference? How is it possible for us to see these labels in others and not ourselves?

This story teaches me about hospitality. Jesus is teaching the community that 'welcoming the stranger' is not identifying someone else according to our perceived category or stigma. It is never about isolating someone as a 'prospective member' or someone as a 'nonmember,' to secure ourselves as 'a member.'

Hospitality is when we adjust ourselves to accept someone different. The possessed man was healed but so was the community healed of the sickness of segregation.

May we be healed, right now, healed from what possess us to stigmatize other people. May we be healed from believing that we have to change others to be more like ourselves. May we be freed from our need to imprison others with labels. Gratefully, we believe in a God who is secure enough to welcome and heal individuals and communities that find themselves possessed. Thanks be to God! Alleluia. Amen.