



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Removing the Scarlet U

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B, Mark 1:21-28

January 28, 2023

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Language has the power to liberate. I learned that firsthand while in a year-long clinical pastoral education program as a chaplain resident at Wesley Medical Center in Wichita, Kansas. In addition to making hospital visits, we were expected to present a project on any medical topic of our choosing. I chose suicide survivors, persons who have experienced the death of a family member or close friend by suicide.

The reason I chose this topic is that my family, like many of yours, has been touched by suicide. My father died by suicide 40 years ago when I was 23. For years, it was hard for me to talk about this, and frankly, it's still hard, partly because I felt stigmatized. Much like the heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel who wore the scarlet A for adultery, I felt like I was walking around with a scarlet S on my forehead. People seemed afraid to talk with me about my dad's suicide, but I wondered what they said behind my back or thought, and I wondered if I was being shunned in some way. The worst part of it is I began to stigmatize myself.

While working on the project, I read a book on suicide survivors that suggested a different way of talking about a loved one's suicide. Rather than saying, 'My father committed suicide,' the author invited me to say, 'My father died by suicide.' You can't imagine how freeing that was. Rather than defining my father's life by what was once considered a crime or unpardonable sin, the cause of his death was simply defined, while leaving open the truth of his life as a whole as a loving father and husband, a beloved child of God. And as his son who bears his name, I've come to learn I'm not defined by his cause of death, but in the multiple dimensions in which I'm his son, and a fellow beloved child of God.

In our Gospel passage from Mark, Jesus had a choice. He could have ignored the man with the unclean spirit, which is probably how the religious leaders of the synagogue would have handled this situation. Or he could lean into this man's story and plight.

Jesus courageously chose the latter. Simply by looking in this man's direction, Jesus gave dignity to the humanity of this person shouting. Jesus removed whatever demon this unclean spirit was. He did so through the authority of his speech, his language. But he removed a perhaps larger demon at the same time. He removed the stigma this man felt. It was as if Jesus erased the scarlet U for unclean spirit this man felt on his forehead.

Jesus saw the unclean spirit as a temporary phenomenon, not as the end-all, be-all nature of the person in front of him. He saw this man as a beloved child of God in all the multiple dimensions of his humanity. One writer describes the unclean spirit as antihuman. Well, there can be nothing more antihuman than being stigmatized, to be put into one box with one label that defines a person's whole life as one to be shunned. I wonder too about the unclean spirit itself.

One thing you have to say for this spirit, it recognized the true identity of Jesus as the Holy One of God, when so many others close to him failed to see him that way. One wonders, could there be a tiny seed of redemption within this spirit? I'm reminded of the quote from Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet*:

'Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act just once with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.'

If not for the unclean spirit itself, this thought expressed what Jesus did for the man with the spirit.

During our Baguette Brothers men's Bible study this week, one of our brothers told us about a documentary entitled, 'Shaking Hands with the Devil.' It's a short film presented by David Plummer, an international wildlife photographer who has Parkinson's disease, about the plight of persons in Parkinson's in Kenya. Because of their shaking with the tremors of Parkinson's, sufferers are stigmatized as having evil spirits and as practitioners of witchcraft. Many are persecuted and some have been outright killed. They are denied medicine and shunned from the community. People are afraid to shake hands with them or get near them because they think they will catch these evil spirits.

The documentary ends with hopeful efforts seeking to educate and tell the truth about Parkinson's, to bring the language of liberation for those stigmatized. A key part of these efforts is the formation of support groups to let sufferers know they are not alone, that others share their experience and understand.

As part of my clinical pastoral education project in Wichita, I joined a suicide survivors support group. Most of the members of the group had experienced the death by suicide of a family member or close friend within the previous six months or so. There were two of us in the group who had been touched by suicide a number of years prior. We offered some hope to those who were still reeling from recent tragic deaths of loved ones. In doing so, we also felt healing for our old wounds and scars by sharing in the healing of others who shared this bond.

Just knowing there were persons like me and hearing their stories made me feel less stigmatized. I was embraced by a community who understood. That's what Jesus is modeling in our Gospel passage. He fully embraces the man with the unclean spirit as a member of the community who deserves to be heard, to be healed, and to be given a chance to contribute.

Jesus removes the scarlet U from the man's forehead.

What letters do we need to join Jesus in removing from those around us?

What letters do we need to join Jesus in removing from ourselves?

Amen.