

## Sermons at St. Luke's

*A sermon preached by The Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, January 29, 2012.*

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mental illness is not new, as we see from the Gospel we just heard, from Mark. We probably understand mental illness today better than ever before, but I just have a feeling that 100 years from now folks will be saying "Can you believe what they thought back in 2012?" Not unlike "Can you believe that North Carolina forcibly sterilized mentally retarded citizens as late as 1974, almost 30 years after Nazi Germany stopped doing it?" A nurse here at St. Luke's told me recently of a psychiatric patient she encountered in nursing school who posed the thought-provoking question: "Why is it that when I talk to God it is called prayer, but when God talks to me it is called schizophrenia?" Why indeed? As recently as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the mentally ill were often packed away in what amounted to warehouses, out of sight, out of mind. A hundred years before that they were chained up in prison. In some ancient cultures they were put to death.

Psychiatry is a pretty new science though. Freud died in 1939 and Jung in 1961, and there are life-changing psychotropic meds available today that weren't available twenty years ago. Mental illness, whatever else it may be, isn't fun though, for anyone. Depression is as real as a broken kneecap, you just can't photograph it, and I suspect it may be more painful. There are folks here every Sunday who know something

about this. And yet it took a battle royal in Washington not so long ago, in the Congress and the courts, to get Blue Cross and the like to reach parity between psychiatric illness and broken legs. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, founder of the Special Olympics, had a lot to do with that.

In Morganton, where I grew up, we had Broughton Hospital, so there have always been an abundance of psychiatrists and psychiatric patients for a small mountain town. I remember waterskiing at Lake James as a teenager with a group that included a psychiatrist. One in our group skied into a tree stump, gashing his leg pretty badly, causing the psychiatrist to holler "We need to get him to a doctor." There must not have been a nurse there. And a Broughton patient at Grace Church one Sunday, when in his sermon the priest said "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," spoke up and asked "What could be fairer than that?" I had in my prison congregation once a sweet gentle man who truly thought he was the Archangel Michael. I am trying now, with little success or promise of it, to work with a man in a prison medical facility on the Minnesota tundra who if only he would take his meds might well be able to go home to the Virgin Islands. I rest my case.

There was at least one mentally ill fellow in the synagogue at Capernaum on that Sabbath when Jesus visited. Capernaum, where Jesus first encountered his fishermen colleagues Peter, Andrew, James

and John, and the IRS man Matthew, is on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, an inland lake. We heard in the Gospel last Sunday how he called those blue collar fishermen, not white collar academic rabbis, and they followed him for the rest of their lives. The ruins of a synagogue built around the year 300 are there, built on the foundation of and over the original synagogue in which Jesus preached. It is maybe the length of a parking lot from the ruins of what is said to be Peter's water front home. Archaeologists found the home, the walls and floors intact, underneath the ruins of a 4<sup>th</sup> century church. I have to tell you that walking through it, perhaps on floors Jesus and Peter walked on, is thought provoking 2000 years later.

Jesus preached and taught there in the synagogue, we assume at the invitation of the synagogue leadership. Someone there must have said, in effect, "Here's Jesus of Nazareth with us today, let's see what he has to say." Well, he had a lot to say. What he did though is what we are really about here today. "Preach the Gospel always. Use words if necessary." That quote, often attributed to Francis, and certainly Franciscan in thought, is descriptive too of Christ.

There may have been plenty of mentally ill in Capernaum then. There were plenty of everything else. As has been noted, it was sort of a wild frontier town. Who knows, maybe there was a bit of New Orleans in

it. Someone said of New Orleans once that “We don’t hide our crazy people. We showcase them and parade them around.” The line between mental illness and mental health is blurry, and dependent on so many factors. I have long been intrigued by the clear link between mental illness and creativity. No one who knew either man would ever have called William Faulkner or Tennessee Williams poster children for mental health, or sobriety. And Faulkner, in As I Lay Dying, wrote that there is no such thing as sane or crazy. It all depends on who is looking. I go back to the patient encountered by a nurse here. “Why is it that when I talk to God it’s prayer, but when God talks to me it schizophrenia?”

There is an abundance of mental illness among the homeless, though we must not paint with too broad a brush. And heaven knows there is a superabundance of it in prisons. I think of one man I have encountered at the same street corner here for ten years. In many ways crazy, to use the generic, but a survivor of sorts. I remind myself at times, I have to, that I don’t have to like him, but to love him. I also try to look for the face of Christ in him, or for the fellow in the ditch on the Jericho Road. Sometimes though I cannot see what Stevie Wonder can see, and it is my failing altogether.

The mentally ill guy in the synagogue at Capernaum had “an unclean spirit.” I think I was already ordained, over 26 years now, before

I knew that the Episcopal Church allows for exorcism, the practice of expelling evil spirits by means of prayer or set formulas. I hasten to add that exorcism, in the Episcopal Church and in the Roman Catholic Church, is restricted to priests who have the bishop's permission. I have never heard of it being done, apart from Hollywood, but it is a very old, pre-Christian remedy that illustrates how mental illness was viewed way back when.

Now it is interesting what our guy in the synagogue had to say to Jesus:

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?  
Have you come to destroy us? I know who you  
are, the Holy One of God.

At first blush we might well think, gosh, Jesus has been called worse than that. It has been suggested that in naming Jesus "the Holy One of God," the man was one up on the sober-sided members of the synagogue in being aware that Jesus was the Christ. It has also been described as the cry of a conscience-stricken man, sensing his own separation from God, frantically trying to control the divine by uttering God's name. Remember that back then to know someone's name was to have power over her. My own guess, nothing more, is that both the possessed man and the evil spirit were speaking out. And Jesus

addressed, or rebuked, not the man but the evil spirit, who then came out of him. Presumably that meant that the fellow suddenly seemed with it. Interestingly the Greek word used by Mark for rebuke has an alternative meaning of exorcise.

Well the miracle, and for anyone who has ever experienced mental illness, personally or through a loved one, the healing of this man was a miracle indeed, the miracle wowed the synagogue congregation. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another “What is this? A new teaching, with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” Not unlike “even the winds and the seas obey him,” down the hill at the lake. A lot happened in that little subdivision. Put another way, when Jesus is in town, don’t blink or you might miss something. At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. I guess so. Of course little did they know that he was about to walk across the parking lot and cure Peter’s mother-in-law. Imagine, Peter, the first Bishop of Rome in the tradition of the Church, had a mother-in-law. But that means Peter must have had a wife too. My gracious. I am reminded of the state legislator in east Texas who when Al Smith ran against Herbert Hoover in 1928 said that if Smith were elected the Pope would move to Washington, with his wife.

And after Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus went on to heal a leper and a paralytic.

The mentally ill may make us uncomfortable at times. Perfectly sane people can do that, relatives even, and I have long thought sanity was on a continuum, not unlike sexuality. We must though never forget that they are loved and honored children of God. During the 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton flew home to Arkansas to preside over and benefit politically from an execution. The condemned prisoner had truly lost his mind. Crazy as a loon is the scientific psychiatric diagnosis. Pecan pie was his dessert of choice for his last meal. The chaplain said the poor fellow didn't know why they were allowing him free choice on the menu. He had been eating three meals a day there for some time, had never before had a choice, and it wasn't even his birthday. He ordered so much though, steak and pork chops, with a side of shrimp, that he couldn't finish it all. Not to worry, "I'll save the pecan pie and have it at bedtime." This of course is a textbook case of how not to treat the mentally ill. I asked Terry Sanford once about the one execution he allowed as Governor, and he said "I was wrong." May Bill Clinton come to the same realization. And the Christ I think I know would agree.

In the lesson we heard today from Deuteronomy, God says "I will raise up...a prophet...I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet..."

And God did, no surprise, in first Moses and then Christ. Neither of them I think would sanction any maltreatment of the mentally ill, whether the guy in the synagogue at Capernaum or the fellow who has daily patrolled Ninth Street for years now. Rabbi Marc Gellman, the best theologian I know, has a wonderful column every Thursday in the News & Observer. This week he notes, quoting Gandhi, that to the poor, God is bread. Similarly, to the mentally ill, God is happiness and peace, the blessed relief that comes with the lifting of the horrible weight and intolerable pain of mental illness.

We can do better, and we will. Thomas Merton and other Christian saints might remind us not to overlook Buddhist wisdom:

Drink tea and nourish life; with the first sip, joy; with the second sip, satisfaction; with the third sip, peace; with the fourth, a Danish.

Amen.

St. Luke's

29 January 2012