

In the book *Mister God, This is Anna*, the child writing her thoughts to God offers these insightful words: "I suppose that the human mind can only stand so much grief and anguish. After that the fuses blow." This is certainly the case with the sacred story of our man legion today...his fuses have blown. We find him alone and isolated living among the Tomb, howling night and day, hitting himself to the point of bruising and cutting himself with the stones to try and relieve his mental pain and anguish. The community afraid of his insanity has shackled him making him a virtual prisoner. What has brought him to this madness? Did he lose someone he deeply loved and they are buried in these tombs and he has buried himself there too? Perhaps he suffers from a chemical imbalance. Or perhaps he made a choice that he cannot live with and his guilt has made it impossible to live among the living and so he identifies with the dead choosing to live among them instead. We do not know his story, we can only surmise that the darkest hurt and sorrow has brought him to these depths. Unfortunately, Legion's story is not unique.

The Canadian Mental Health Association provides us with alarming statistics about the high degree of depression and mental illness in our Canadian society. 1 in 5 Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime. The remaining 4 will have a friend, family member or colleague who will. Mental illness affects thinking, mood or behaviour and can be associated with distress or impairment of functioning, with symptoms that vary from mild to severe. A complex interplay of genetic, biological, personality and environmental factors causes mental illness. Mental illness affects people of all ages, educational and income levels

and cultures. About 20% of people with a mental disorder have a co-occurring substance abuse problem. 1 in 10 Canadians, 15 years of age and over, report symptoms consistent with alcohol or illicit drug dependence. 3.8% of adults are classified as having moderate or severe gambling problems. Schizophrenia affects 1%, major depression impacts 8% and anxiety disorder 12% of people. 70% of mental health problems and illnesses have their onset during childhood or adolescence. Only 1/3 of those who need mental health services in Canada actually receive them. Only 50% of Canadians would tell friends or coworkers that they have a family member with a mental illness compared to 72% who would discuss cancer or 68% with diabetes. 46% of Canadians think people use the term mental illness as an excuse for bad behaviour and 27% are fearful of being around people who suffer from serious mental illness. The stigma attached to mental illness presents a serious barrier not only to diagnosis and treatment but also to acceptance in the community. In Canada, mental illness is the second leading cause of human disability and premature death. On any given week, at least 500,000 employed Canadians are unable to work due to mental illness. The economic cost of mental illnesses in Canada was estimated to be at least \$7.3 billion in 1993. According to the World Health Organization, depression will be the single biggest medical burden on health by 2020.

Statistically, if there are 100 people in worship at LSU this means that at least 20 people on any given Sunday are suffering from a broken heart or mind or soul among us and we may not know their story of hurt and pain any more than we know Legion's story. And that, says Christian psychologist Dr. Henry Cloud, is part of the problem. Isolation is one of the greatest side effects of human depression and mental illness. Every day he meets people in his

practice who feel disconnected and cut off from humanity even loved ones. There is such a stigma against normal human feelings of grief and sorrow that people feel forced to erect a false self to pretend that all is well. When someone asks us how we are, we claim that everything is fine to such a point that we cut ourselves off from our own feelings of sadness and depression and try to hide from our own negative thoughts. Addiction begins as a person's attempt to escape one's deepest difficult feelings either through alcohol or drugs or sex or work or shopping or religion or gambling whatever. In our society we might share superficially but not deeply and so we remain alone in our emotional pain and this deepens the wounds leaving them unhealed. To further our isolation, our society is afraid of people who suffer from long bouts of serious depression or from bipolar or schizophrenia or personality disorders or autism or aspergers or eating disorders or some form of addiction. We are always afraid of that which we do not understand and so we isolate those who are suffering and their families. Perhaps we are afraid that if we get too close to someone's emotional or mental pain we just might lose ourselves too.

When I was a student minister I served as a student chaplain in a hospital and we would be placed on different wards. Turns out, my favourite ward was the psychiatric ward. It was my favourite because the people in that ward may have felt broken, but they were real, there were no pretenders or false selves hiding behind smiling masks. They were struggling to deal with the hurt and pain, the harsher reality of human existence and I loved them for it. I remember one broken soul in particular. She was a French Roman Catholic woman who had 10 children – all molested by their father. When she went to her Priest for help he told her to have another baby. She did and nothing changed. So she divorced her husband against the

advice of her priest and eventually met a wonderful man who wanted to marry her. Her priest told her she would be sinning and committing adultery if she married him. Her guilt and sorrow over her children's suffering and her love for a man that was not her husband eventually drove her into a deep depression and she was diagnosed with manic-depression and was hospitalized. Our hospitals are full of people whose hearts and spirits and minds have been broken and rather than be places of guilt and isolation, our faith communities need to be places of healing for them. So what can we do? What makes healing possible?

This story reminds us that healing is possible when faith in something greater than ourselves enters into our isolation. Jesus steps out of the safety and privacy of his boat and engages with this tormented man. Jesus is not afraid to enter into conversation with him and in doing so begins to break his isolation. While the man is afraid of what Jesus coming into his life might mean and is afraid of further torment, Jesus enters in regardless and pushes through the man's fears and asks him his name.

It is always a risk, allowing someone into our own story, giving someone the privilege of getting to know us but the man allows Jesus in and begins to share his story saying that his sorrows, his demons, his hurts, his "sins" are many. Giving voice to his pain is the beginning of this man's healing journey. The word "confession" simply means literally "with voice". To begin to give voice to our unhappiness, to our fears, to the inner critical voices that are condemning us, giving voice to our story breaks our isolation and begins to heal our wounds.

Dr. Henry Cloud, in his book, *Changes that Heal* says that he believes there are 3 key ingredients to healing: Truth, Grace, and Time. In our society, it is difficult to share our truth with someone else, someone who will consider our story sacred and honour it, not judge it or

condemn it, someone who will hear it and allow it to be ours. It is important that people who are suffering from emotional pain have a safe place to share their truth and that whoever is hearing it, can handle their truth whether we are that person's parents or grandparents or relative or friend or neighbour or fellow churchgoer. But before we can share our truth with someone else, we need to share our truth with ourselves. I find that before I share a truth with someone, I go to God to test out my truth. God is highly confidential and understanding – I love God, cause God isn't a gossip, our secrets are safe with God. I always find, if God can handle my truth, than maybe I can handle my own truth too. Because usually the person we are hiding most from is indeed ourselves. It is hard to be honest with ourselves. To tell ourselves what we are really feeling, what we are really thinking, what we have really done or would like to do. Getting truthful with ourselves and owning our own thoughts and feelings especially when they feel unacceptable to us is the first step to our healing. If our minds are broken, it is hard to get our thoughts straight. My aunt Daisy used to say to my uncle Cam who looking back probably suffered from some mood disorder, "your thoughts are crooked and you need to get them straight." We need to check our thoughts to see if they are distorted or not. We need to check our perceptions on things with others to make sure we are thinking clearly and in reality. And we not only need to speak the truth about ourselves but the truth about our reality. We need to face the truth of "what is" no matter how difficult it is. As my friend Leslie Kawamura said, "suffering happens when we refuse to accept what is." We need to face the truth to be set free.

And when we finally do share our truth with someone, in order to heal we need to experience Grace – complete love and acceptance for all of it – the good, the bad and the

ugly. That is exactly, what Legion receives from Jesus. Jesus isn't afraid of Legion's truth, of his pain, of his insanity, of his extreme behaviour and out of control emotions. Jesus receives He doesn't give Legion a lecture about how badly he is behaving; he doesn't tell him he shouldn't feel what he is feeling; he doesn't correct him or punish him or shame him further; he doesn't tell him what he should or shouldn't do, he simply has a conversation and asks him questions about himself and receives this man's anguish. Jesus receives him exactly as he is – that is Grace.

And says Dr. Cloud, it takes Time – a lot of time to heal from emotional and mental pain. We are told that the man is clothed and sitting in his right mind and people are amazed that this man is so changed, but you and I all know that healing is not that instantaneous, that this man's story of healing has just begun. And that is why Jesus tells the man he cannot follow him and join the disciples, that he must return to his community and share his story with his family and friends. Jesus sets a boundary with this man and just as easily as he broke through this man's isolation, Jesus knows that if his healing is to continue and deepen he now needs to separate from Jesus and begin to re-enter his life with his own community. This man must learn to live again in the reality of his own life and not run or hide from it, but enter into the fullness of his life again and claim it as his own.

You and I know that healing from depression or addiction or a mental illness or an eating disorder or whatever way our minds or heart or spirit is broken, is a long and winding journey, and life might never look like it did before we broke, but healing is possible, better is possible, extended times of joy are possible, longer periods of feeling good are possible,

sobriety is possible, feeling relatively normal is possible, feeling content and at peace with ourselves and the world is possible, one day, one moment at a time.

I encourage you to listen to what some wise people have said: “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” (Helen Keller) “It is never too late to be what you might have been”. (George Eliott) “Now and then it’s good to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy.” (Guillaume Apollinaire)

It isn’t easy to live with mental anguish and it isn’t easy to live with someone who suffers from it, but the promise is that we are never in it alone... that just as Jesus willingly and graciously and compassionately entered into the life of Legion, God enters into our lives with the same grace and compassion and understanding.

Many years ago in Winnipeg, I was standing in an art gallery. There was a painting hanging there entitled Pool of Sorrows. It was a dark stagnant pool with dead trees and stumps emerging from it. You could feel that something tragic, a drowning perhaps, had occurred in the pool and just staring into the painting made you want to cry. Behind me, the voice of the security guard asked me: “do you see it?” “See what?” I asked. “ Look harder into the painting” he said. And then I saw them. Five red marks in the middle of the painting, and then I saw him, the wounded Christ standing there in the midst of the pond of sorrows, his wounded hands outstretched. Sometimes we need someone to help us see that the Christ, the wounded healer is there in the midst of our lives if we have eyes to see that he is with us in our own pool of sorrows.

It is my hope and my challenge to this faith community, that we become a very real healing place for those who are suffering from the disappointments and wounds of human existence.

**That all of us who are wounded, and we are all wounded in some way by life, can become wounded healers to one another. To hear one another's stories, and speak our own truths, to give and receive God's Holy Grace with one another, and to give one another the space and time we need for healing. May it be so. Amen.**