

Homily – Restless for God

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Today's reading is about miracles. And, I know that some of you have no trouble with the miracle stories, while others are especially skeptical of the miracles stories in which Jesus heals demoniacs. So today's sermon gets at my own personal way of grappling with this story.

This past week I had my annual physical. And once again the topic the doctor and I discussed the most was my RLS. Restless Leg Syndrome is a condition that is more common in those of northern European descent, and both my mother and grandfather join me in suffering from it. As one gets sleepy, the brain misfires and sends a signal, usually to the legs, to move. The signal is not physically painful but it is sort of somewhere between ticklish and creepy crawly. I have never heard it described accurately. Be that as it may, Restless Leg Syndrome makes it very hard to sleep because moving and sleeping tend to counteract one another. And it makes it very hard for the bed partner to sleep as well. I have worked with many doctors to find a relief to RLS including two different prescription medications. Sleeping, especially on an airplane can be miserable. I know that some of you also have RLS.

And, here is why I am telling you all of this. One of the most recent cures for RLS that I have been given is something called Trauma Releasing Exercises. These are a series of physical practices that are designed to help with recovery from chronic stress or post trauma symptoms due to generalized life situations, accidents, natural disasters, and political violence. The exercises take 5-10 minutes and are a series of movements that fatigue different muscle groups. At the end of the exercises you lie flat on your back and do a last set of movements that start a series of body tremors. The tremors start in the legs, and can then move through the torso, arms, neck and head. The convulsions can last a minute or ten minutes. You can stop the convulsions at any time, and they don't hurt. The theory is that the tremors or convulsions work to release trauma that has gotten stuck in the body. And, by extension the tremors are to relieve RLS. The convulsions cause healing. Hold on to that comforting thought of healing while I bring in the Gospel reading.

In today's Gospel reading we have a series of actions by Jesus that demonstrate his authority. Two thousand years ago authority was simply the ability to cause another person to do something, and it was usually based on a person's status at birth. But, we know that Jesus' earthly status is not from his birth. We are told that the scribes in the synagogue had knowledge, but Jesus has something greater. Jesus and his teachings had authority that caused things to happen. Those who heard him that day

were astonished , and it also caused one man to act out. It is written, “just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.”

Let me get this out of the way. I have no idea what the unclean spirit is. Some scholars point to mental illness, or a medical condition like epilepsy. Others insist on it being an independently willed entity, something we usually call a demon. Still others argue that spirits in the New Testament are metaphors for anything that might possess or control us like anger, fear, lust, greed, hatred, or envy. From my own life experience, I would add one more theory to the list.

In my work as a chaplain at the Palo Alto VA Medical Center, I was with soldiers, sailors, and Marines who suffered from PTSD, post traumatic stress disorder. These men and women had experienced some awful things in Iraq and Afghanistan. And, I’m not just talking about the wounds that cut into flesh and bone. Instead, I’m talking about the awful things that were seen, heard, or even done. In general, trauma is from an experience of being overwhelmed by chronic stress or a sudden event. Trauma is not a way of thinking or a feeling. It is something that is held in the body. The trauma from the experiences of these men and women was stuck in their bodies, and controlled them like an unclean spirit. So maybe the man with the unclean spirit suffers from trauma. But once again, I have no idea what the unclean spirit actually is in today’s Gospel reading. Whatever the cause, I see a very tormented man whose mind and body is possessed and out of control. He is not living into the beautiful life that God has created for him. Something false has taken over. Jesus sees this as well, and he has compassion. He heals the man.

“And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.” Let me point out that the tremors happened as the healing occurred. Perhaps instead of being a sign of the bad thing that has taken over the man’s life, perhaps the convulsions are actually part of the healing process. Perhaps it is like the Trauma Releasing Exercise that I shared earlier. Be that as it may Jesus performed a miracle. And, for anyone who suffers from trauma and its after effects, healing or release from trauma is a godsend.

Now, I have previously shared the concept of the three-fold way of knowing. We know with our minds, hearts, and bodies. Our intellect, our ability to connect, and our movements all are centers of knowing. In churches we spend a lot of time talking about forgiveness which is usually an exercise of our mind or intellect. We change our way of thinking so that we can release the memory of a wrong that has been done to us. But the intellectual part of forgiveness doesn’t go far enough.

I am convinced that our world suffers a crisis of unresolved trauma that is held within our bodies or moving centers. Many of us suffer in this way. And, as the

saying goes “wounded people wound other.” I believe that many of the ugly things in the world today are caused by trauma. This includes trauma from our political climate, trauma from being in the midst of war in Gaza and Ukraine, and trauma when our bodies just don’t do the things we want them to do.

And, post trauma reactions imprison us into reliving the original trauma-inducing experience. Unhealed trauma creates repetitive compulsive behaviors. Traumatic stress is a major cause of violence. Imagine a world in which more of us are able to forgive AND release the trauma that is held within us. For a moment, let go of your doubts that this miracle of worldwide healing could ever happen. We are a people who believe in miracles. Miracles may not be the magical thinking that has crept into our Christian tradition over the years, but miracles are what Jesus calls us to. The miracle of healing can occur. More than any other gospel writer, Mark, the Gospel writer that we heard from today, emphasizes Jesus’ miraculous power to heal. Of the eighteen miracles recorded in the Gospel of Mark, thirteen have to do with healing. This may be Mark’s attempt to show a relationship or correlation between religion and health.

God has created each and every one of us with beauty, wholeness, and the ability to heal. God has designed us to evolve through trauma but effects of a negative event can get stuck inside our bodies. Wounds get stored and stuck in our bodies, and these injuries overshadow our true self. It is these stuck wounds that can make forgiveness and reconciliation so hard to achieve. Just as Jesus healed the man with the unclean spirit, our own forgiveness and reconciliation may well include the healing of our bodies from trauma. Is it any surprise that Jesus knew to do this? He is God after all.

Now, Jesus healed the man in one fell swoop, but for most of us it takes much longer than that. It can be a journey of a lifetime. And, as with all healing, there is no shame when the healing is a struggle, and it takes a long time. Whether you have Restless Leg Syndrome or some other ailment, I pray that we can live in a world in which we see that trauma is our common human experience. A lot of times with trauma there are wounds that we just can’t see. Sometimes we are afraid to reveal our own wounds because we think we are the only one who struggles. Just like the man in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus calls us to healing. And, whether it is Trauma Releasing Exercises or some other method, we must do the work of healing. We must heal as individuals, we must heal as a nation, and we must heal as a world. Remember that healing takes many forms including that which is held in our moving centers. Let us walk with one another as we do the work to heal from trauma and once again become the people that God has created us to be.