

## **Scriptural Reflections on Mental Illness and the Work of the Mental Health Committee**

In the Gospels we are told of the Lord's encounter with a man named Legion who had been exiled to the margins of society because of the many demons that possessed him. "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" Legion asks in Luke 8:28 (NRSV). What Jesus "does" with Legion is to cast out his demons and send him back to the community to proclaim to others the efficacy of God's love in his life. In a piece for the Episcopal Mental Illness Network ([www.eminnews.org](http://www.eminnews.org)), The Reverend Richard York asserts that this incident is instructive for guiding the Christian community toward effective ministries for the mentally ill. To paraphrase Rev. York, Jesus seeks this man out, loves and heals him, and finally encourages him to join and actively participate in the church community.

Society no longer interprets mental illness as the result of demonic possession. Professional mental health practitioners rely on decades of scientific research that identify environmental and physiological factors as the underlying causes of mental illness. Yet like Legion, the mentally ill are all too often ostracized from the mainstream, and for many, their experience feels like they are battling with relentless demons.

As a Diocesan committee comprised of lay and clerical mental health professionals and advocates who view this issue from both clinical and theological perspectives, we have all experienced the theme of broken relationships in our work with the mentally ill. Those who suffer from mental illness generally struggle with establishing healthy and fulfilling relationships.

This personal estrangement parallels our own broken relationship with God. In his death and resurrection Jesus sought to heal that brokenness so that we might once again live in full relationship with God. Our participation in the Body of Christ entails creating a nurturing environment where this same kind of healing can occur as we learn to interact with one another in fellowship and love. This may mean providing gentle encouragement to those who seem reluctant to connect or overcoming our own natural tendency to avoid those who behave in an unexpected manner.

The stated mission of the Diocesan Mental Health Committee is "to live out the reconciling love of Jesus by offering educational programs and networking resources so that the Church may be a hospitable dwelling for people living with mental illness." We strive to seek out, love, and offer healing and encouragement so that the Legions in our midst can actively participate in our church community. Amen

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### **Genesis 32:24-31**

*Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall not longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me*

*your name.” but he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.*

We too often feel as though we are left alone, wrestling with demons along the muddy banks of life. We try to name those demons. We try to subdue them. We may even try to wrest a blessing from them. Some of us go through life limping because of our wrestling matches.

The good news of this passage is that God remains present with us, even as we wrestle with the demons of this life. God is willing to become vulnerable out of love for us. God breaks into our lives when we least expect it and often when we're focused on something else, or tired, or unable to see, or alone and vulnerable. God invites us into relationship and enters into our struggles right alongside us. Sometimes we may even find it difficult to tell the difference between wrestling with our demons and accepting God's embrace. God wants something from us, something that cannot be commanded or imposed but only given freely. And so God comes down to our level to wrestle alongside us.

God is present in the midst of our struggles, whether they be mental, physical, emotional, or spiritual. We are called to prayerfully consider how and where God is present to us. We are called to consider what God might want to accomplish with us through our struggles. God may want to offer us blessings or a new name, as God did with Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok. We too may want to ask God's blessings on our struggles, especially those that occur in the dusty places of our lives, the low and muddy places, where we least expect to encounter God.

Our calling as people of God and as members of the Committee on Mental Health is to walk alongside those who struggle, to help us all to understand that we are not alone in the darkness and that God is with us throughout. We may all survive the struggles to see the face of God, limping into the rest of our lives as a result of our struggles. Like Jacob, we may claim a new name and a new relationship with the God who blesses us even in our struggles.

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*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*

*Ephesians 2: 19-22*

The overarching mission of the Committee on Mental Health is to ensure that our Church is a welcoming community for all people affected by mental illness. Education will continue to be a primary focus for the committee in 2008. Topics, such as depression and PTSD, are wide reaching in their impact but create a sense of discomfort so that the starting place for conversation becomes elusive. Consequently, those struggling with these conditions often drift to the margins of communities, where they are considered to be at a safer distance.

The *Families Throughout the Lifespan* workshop templates are developed with sound clinical information and theological grounding dealing with topics that affect individuals, families and parish communities throughout the Diocese. These materials are intended to enable clergy and lay leaders to facilitate these conversations within their parishes. Through the Resource Clearing House, the committee will assist parishes in locating speakers to present information about mental health issues relevant to their communities. We also hope to expand the use of our website throughout the Diocese to enhance its value as a source of information about mental illness and to celebrate the powerful ministries emerging in Virginia to address the needs of the mentally ill and their families.

These educational initiatives will help us to offer factual knowledge to increase familiarity about mental illness so that we can minimize the fear and misinformation often governing the community's perception of mental illness and creating an "us" and "them" stigma. With increased understanding, we hope to transform our parishes into dwelling places that encourage the strangers and aliens at the margins into full participation in the household of God.

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### **1 Kings 19:9-13a**

*At that place Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here; Elijah?" He answered ... "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.*

Like Elijah, we may find ourselves wishing for our own demise or imagining our imminent death at the hand of others. We may sense that we are buffeted by a great wind, one that has the power to split mountains or break rocks into pieces. We may feel the earth moving beneath our feet, unsettling our sense of balance. We may feel the white hot flames of a raging fire in our hearts and our minds, singeing our hair and searing our skin.

In these times, as in all times, God is with us. In the midst of fire and tempest and earthquake, God can still be found in the still small voice speaking to us from the midst of the whirlwind. God calls each of us into relationship with the Almighty, when we healthy and when we are dealing with illness of body, mind, or spirit.

Our calling as people of God and as members of the Committee on Mental Health is to walk alongside those who struggle with a sense of terror, paranoia, or depression, to help us all to understand that we are not alone with our horrors and that God is with us throughout. We may all survive the earthquake, fire, and whirlwind to hear the still, small voice of God calling us to venture outside the cave.

## Scripture Passages for reflection on Mental Illness

*While by no means exhaustive, the following passages from Scripture may be useful in generating discussion among the participants in your workshop. You can select one or several to use in a handout, or you may feel other passages would lend themselves to reflection on mental health issues.*

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As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

*John 15: 9-12*

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For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.

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*Romans 12: 4-5*

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

*1 Corinthians 12: 12-27*

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So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

*Ephesians 2: 19-22*

*Psalm 42 speaks to the experience of many who struggle with depression. It poignantly describes the inner pain and anguish that can lead to a sense of isolation, even from God. It also demonstrates the healing that connection can bring - connection with God that a loving faith community can foster.*

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold the face of God?  
My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually,  
"Where is your God?"

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.  
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;  
all your waves and your billows have gone over me.  
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,  
and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"  
As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.

*Psalm 43 is a plea for God's support and favorable judgment.*

Give judgment for me, O God,  
And defend my cause against an ungodly people;  
Deliver me from the deceitful and the wicked.

For you are the God of my strength;  
Why have you put me from you?  
And why do I go so heavily while the enemy oppresses me?

Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me,  
And bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling;

That I may go to the altar of God,  
To the God of my joy and gladness;  
And on the harp I will give thanks to you, O God my God.

Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?  
And why are you so disquieted within me?

Put your trust in God;  
For I will yet give thanks to him,  
Who is the help of my countenance, and my God.

Psalm 43