

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Mark 1: 21-28
“Possessed”
4th Sunday after Epiphany
February 1, 2015

The man was possessed...possessed by an unclean spirit.

Maybe the picture of the man in your mind's eye is of Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*, mirrored in the face of Macaulay Culkin in *Home Alone*. Perhaps it's a film that pulls out all the Oscar-hopeful special-effects stops to portray a deranged young woman convulsing like a rag doll as a priest waves a crucifix like a fairy godmother's magic wand in front of her face.

The reality of the power of unclean spirits to inhabit a person's body was taken for granted by the New Testament writers.

It is different today.

I, for one, am grateful to be able to relegate unclean spirits to the imaginative realm of artists and filmmakers. Today we can be grateful that modern medical science and psychotherapy can assign diagnoses to what the ancients once called unclean spirits. And I am thankful, oh so thankful, as I am confident that you are, for mental health professionals, for pharmacology, for the courage and hard work of individuals with mental illness and addictions as they support one another and give each other the gift of hope as they travel what can be a really rocky road toward healing.

Because the gospel writer's perception of evil spirits and ours differ to so great a degree, it may seem that the story that we have read today from Mark's gospel may have little, if anything, to say to us today.

However, I have been persuaded that this story, and more pointedly the power of God which is found in Jesus which the story conveys, is an incredible gift, a healing gift, a gift of hope for all who have ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts and minds to imagine healed individuals, healed families, healed churches, healed communities, a healed world.

Brené Brown is a social research professor at the University of Houston. She has written several books and presented two of the most frequently viewed TED talks, so she is pretty famous these days. Many of you know her work, I am guessing.

What Brené Brown's research shows is that there is an epidemic in this country, and it's an epidemic that shoves this year's H3N2 flu epidemic and this week's measles outbreak into the shadows. The epidemic that Brown identifies is an epidemic of shame.

Brown defines shame this way: Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. (1)

According to Brown, "shame is the gremlin who says, 'Uh, uh. You're not good enough. You never finished that MBA. Your wife left you. I know your dad really wasn't in Luxembourg, he was in Sing Sing. I know those things that happened to you growing up. I know you don't think that you're pretty enough or smart enough or talented enough or powerful enough. I know your dad never paid attention, even when you made CEO.' Shame is that thing." (2)

And what the research reveals is that shame is absolutely organized by gender. While shame is experienced equally by people of both genders, it is organized differently. James Mahalik of Boston College asked the question in his

research, What do women need to do to conform to female norms? The top answers in this country: nice, thin, modest, use all available resources for appearance. When he asked about men, what do men need to do to conform with male norms, the answers were always show emotional control, work is first, pursue status, and violence. (3)

[I heard a great lecture on campus last week, delivered by Doug Ottati. He kept exhorting the audience to watch today's Super Bowl half-time show and commercials in order to see what our culture values. I'm not tempted to lay any of my money down on a bet on either the Seahawks or the Patriots, but I might be tempted to bet that the norms from the research I've just cited will be blaring forth in the commercials and half-time show.]

Brown summarizes female shame by quoting a television commercial for the perfume Enjoli: "I can put the wash on the line, pack the lunches, hand out the kisses and be at work at five to nine. I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in the pan and never let you forget you're a man." For women, shame is do it all, do it perfectly and never let them see you sweat. (She adds in her TED talk, "I don't know how much perfume that commercial sold, but I guarantee you, it moved a lot of antidepressants and anti-anxiety meds.")

As for men, she tells about a man who approached her at one of her book signings. He was as honest as honest can be. (I equate his honesty with the man in Mark's story that is today's Scripture lesson.) He said, "I love what you have to say about shame. I'm curious why you didn't mention men." And she said, "I don't study men." And he said, "That's convenient." And she said, "Why?" And he said, "you see those books you just signed for my wife and my three daughters?" She said, "Yeah." "They'd rather me die on top of my white horse than see me fall down. When we show emotion and our vulnerability, we get the you-know-what beat out of us. And don't tell me it's from the guys and the coaches and the dads, because the women in my life are harder on me than anyone else." (4)

Now, I will pause right here and take a step back. I'm guessing a few of you...many of you...most of you...all of you...may be starting to feel a little itchy right about now.

I can think of at least two things that you may be thinking.

The first is: How did she get inside my head like that? How did she get inside my life like that?

If that is what you are thinking, here is my response: I didn't! Brené Brown and her research did!

The second this you may be thinking is, "Who does she think she is to bring up stuff like this....and in church, of all places?"

And all, I can say in response is, Me too.

When I realized that the Spirit was taking me in this direction in relationship to the Scripture lesson, I said to myself, Who do you think you are, bringing up the raw stuff of shame in a sermon? Don't you know that people don't come to church to be made to feel uncomfortable? I will confess that I even got a little bit scared...maybe a lot scared...to bring all this up in this holy place, this sanctuary.

Here is the thing, though. I ultimately realized that *not* to bring it up would be to wiggle away from the deep truth that is embedded in the story and to sell Jesus short. *Not* to talk about the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging is to skirt, to deny even, the authority of Jesus to sit with us in our shame, to sit with us as long as it takes to heal our shame with his love. *Not* to talk about shame would be to keep on being afraid, to keep our personal and congregational and national conversations mired in the questions of "What should we fear?" and "Who should we blame?" (5)

Remember that when Mark wrote his gospel, he did so from the perspective of someone who knew how Jesus's life would turn out in the end...that he would submit himself to the most public shame and humiliation that any human being could experience in his day...being stripped naked and hung on a cross between two convicted felons. Jesus gave

himself over to the experience of shame. He made himself vulnerable for the sake of us all. This is what gave and continues to give his teaching its authority. Jesus has lived shame, so he says to our shame, Me too. Me too.

With his “me too,” Jesus douses our shame with his love, just as surely as he doused with love the shame of the man in the synagogue on that long ago day. The trust in this story from Mark is that Jesus steps into our shame, confronts it, and stops it dead in its tracks. And in so doing, he teaches us how to douse each other with empathy and love so that as individuals, as families, as a community, as a world, and yes, as a church, we are no longer afraid and shame is cast out of us and we are possessed by his new teaching of love.

1. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham, 2012), 69.
2. Brown, “Listening to shame,” TED.com.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 18.