

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton WI

July 21, 2024

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56; "Many Things"

Just an aside - for years I didn't ever title sermons, because I could never come up with anything good, and half the time the Spirit would lead me in a different direction by the time Sunday rolled around. These days I dutifully submit sermon titles, usually just borrowing a word or phrase from the text. "Many things" is, as far as I'm concerned, the best sermon title of all time. Not only is it faithful to the text - Jesus did, after all, teach them many things - but it's also generic enough I could use it every Sunday til Kingdom come. Without further adieu: the first of perhaps many installations of Many Things.

Years ago, when I was serving a church nestled on Pacific Coast Highway in Southern California, I accepted an invitation to attend a luncheon hosted by a local healthcare network. Their stated intention was to nurture conversations between clergy and mental health professionals to address the growing crisis of mental illness in the area. I craved this conversation. As a brand-new pastor, I was well aware that my seminary education had not fully prepared me for the suffering I encountered in ministry. My parishioners carried heavy burdens in body, mind, and spirit. They lived with cancer diagnoses, broken relationships, major depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Meanwhile, the church maintained an ambitious ministry that brought fifty or so unhoused and low-income neighbors to our parking lot each Sunday morning, for a full hot breakfast - pancakes, eggs, sausage, and a truly astonishing amount of coffee. It wasn't just a hunger ministry; it was a dignity ministry, as these individuals were treated with kindness and respect. The ones who came regularly were greeted by name as they accepted their heaping plates of home-cooked food. Over time, I began to learn about some of their burdens, beyond their shared economic security. They told stories about abuse, estrangement, the wounds of war. Many had untreated mental illnesses and unaddressed substance abuse disorders. One of the men experienced severe religious ideation, his mental landscape laced with some pretty disturbing beliefs about God and Satan. The low-grade insecurity I felt about my capacity to offer meaningful pastoral care mushroomed into a feeling of total inadequacy when faced with a man who believed he was possessed by a demon.

So yes, I went into that luncheon hungry for some real conversation, grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with fellow professionals. My hopes were quickly dashed. I am pretty sure that a few of the folks at my table must have registered because the restaurant had famously good cheesecake, because no one seemed particularly interested in a substantive exchange. I vividly remember one therapist cutting me off as I sought counsel about my role in caring for the man with religious ideation.

Essentially, my role was nonexistent. My responsibility was simple: refer him to a psychiatrist. I barely enjoyed the famously good cheesecake as a sudden vocational crisis rumbled in my heart. I went into ministry in part because I felt called to help people, and here I was being told that my value was in my capacity to hand out phone numbers. What, I wondered, was a pastor actually for? More importantly, what was the gospel actually for? Were all those stories of Jesus healing people just cute little fairy tales?

The truth is that the mental health luncheon was not the first time I'd encountered the subtext that faith and faith leaders had little to offer people in crisis. Sometimes it seemed like my pastoral care professors were broken records, reminding us to refer people to proper professionals. Don't operate outside of your field. You can do a couple of sessions of premarital counseling and show up to pray at the hospital, but then you need to get out of the way and let the experts handle the big stuff. I felt like I was being asked to be an off-brand therapist or uncredentialed social worker. And this didn't sit right with me, though it would take years to name why.

Before I say another word, I want to reassure you that I am a big proponent of modern medicine and mental health care. No part of me believes Christians should reject lifesaving interventions for the maladies that harm our minds and bodies. On a personal level, I am deeply indebted to the medication that mitigates my anxiety, and for counselors who have helped me find healing in hard times. I'm also deeply grateful to all the professionals who tend to the illnesses of family, friends, and parishioners.

And I also believe that we all stand in need of healing that goes far deeper than we could ever find on a couch, through a pillbox, or in an operating room. I believe that we would be wise to join the crowd of people desperately seeking the presence and power of Jesus. We need to cry out for help from the one who is not a doctor, but who is a healer nonetheless. We need to grasp at the fringe of his cloak, bring him our sick and our dying, remember that there is more to us than can be summarized in a MyChart file.

The Disciples have just returned from a long journey of preaching, teaching, and healing, exponentially expanding the reach of the gospel throughout the countryside. Jesus wants them to rest - to practice Sabbath. To borrow from contemporary jargon, you might say Jesus was encouraging them to have good boundaries. Only, it's quite clear that there will be no vacation for Jesus or his Disciples. Jesus beholds this mob of people who are unwell in body and mind and spirit, and he has compassion for them.

He cannot turn them away. His desire to meet their need with mercy is too great. His impulse is always and ever to help - to love and to forgive, to heal and to tend, to touch and to teach- many things.

In retrospect, when I consider my perplexing encounter with the man who was tormented by delusions, I'm not sure I would actually do anything differently. Not outwardly. He did indeed need a psychiatrist. But he also needed a Disciple of Jesus - in

this case, an exceedingly green pastor - to bear witness to God's love and compassion for him. He needed someone to care about him enough to pray for him, and share in his pain, and remember him some eighteen years later. I have no idea if he is still in the thrall of illness. I have no idea if he is even still alive. But I know that he has never once been out of the reach of God's goodness and mercy, and that in the fullness of time, when God's Kingdom flourishes on earth as it does in heaven, he will be restored to wholeness in body, mind, and spirit.

And what of us? How do we manage to import ourselves into that crowd pursuing Christ - especially when so many of us have absorbed the message that faith is not a must-have but a nice-to-have, that Jesus may have healed some people a very long time ago but we know better now, that prayer might afford a psychological boost but it doesn't actually change anything?

I suspect we may need to use our imaginations for this one. I mean this quite literally. Imagine yourself approaching Jesus and laying your burdens at his feet.

There is no better place to take anxiety than to the one who counsels not to be afraid. There is no better place to take grief than to the one who wept at the tomb of Lazarus.

There is no better place to take despair than to the one who cried out on the cross. Hand them over, one by one, until your hands are free to take up the hem of his garment. You may find that the anxiety and grief and despair materialize in your heart again the next morning. That's okay.

Fire up your imagination and relinquish it again, and again, and again, until maybe one morning you wake up and the anxiety is less noisy, and the grief is less heavy and the despair has holes in it. Keep giving it to Jesus.

As for the person you love who is sick or in pain - use your imagination for this as well. Close your eyes and picture them wrapped in the arms of Jesus - embraced by God's love made flesh. Maybe you'll sense something like peace well up from within. Maybe you'll whisper or cry that most elemental of words: help.

Or maybe you'll sing it. John Lennon's Help may well be the holiest of pop songs ever written. It's a prayer. There are three versions worth looking up, if you don't mind doing some homework. The original Beatles version, obviously, when the arrangement is cheerful enough to almost mask the vulnerability in its lyrics.¹ And then there's Lennon's 1970 solo piano version, where he can barely get through the song.² He gets lost in the

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?si=dUvumSNZqZGgiCmu&fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR33-YixAI_oo1YOwuuSODQIDD3VuAmIAeRIG166beDBM-uTnSwYkGpw9Y_aem_l3yWrBH8YetFP7jyGB3eVQ&v=2Q_ZzBGPdqE&feature=youtu.be

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?si=2jcrJSNV1BJOsxQ&fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR3XKxsNw5Z>

chords, and his voice breaks mournfully in the refrain. As theologian David Zahl notes³, he needs help just to sing the song. But the one I want you to get stuck in your head is Dolly Parton's cover.⁴ She sings it like someone who trusts that her prayer will be fulfilled - that help will come.

We can't know what that help will look like - Lord knows, sometimes cures are elusive, and the miracle never unfolds. Sometimes the help is in a deeper healing, a blessed assurance that in life and in death we belong to Christ. An unshakeable trust that we are known and loved in our darkest moments. A quiet confidence that we are not alone - that Jesus meets and shares in our suffering. Yes. The best way to sing that song is to trust that the prayer will be fulfilled. Help will come.

After all, Jesus cannot turn us away. He is the Son of God and he wears God's heart on his sleeve. He's too busy to eat, but the rumbling in his gut is not hunger but compassion. He can't help but help. He can't help but heal. He can't help but teach - many things. May we have the faithful imagination to recognize and rush to him, and to receive the many things he longs to offer his people. Amen.

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⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZeQf3fnHOU>