

First Sunday in Lent  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church  
Rev. Jason Glombicki  
February 18, 2018

Here we are again in the wilderness of Lent, and here we are again after another deadly school shooting. Many of you know I was the chaplain for the closest pediatric trauma center following the Newtown school shooting. And, so, each time a school shooting happens, a wave of memories emerges. With this far too frequent wave, I often hear attempts to make sense of a senseless tragedy. Most recently we heard the story of an orphaned, loner, teen who was expelled from school with a mental illness that drove him to commit a heinous massacre.

My first response is that there is absolutely no excuse for the Parkland shooter. What he did was evil and horrific. At the same time, he's a child of God.

Second, I see similarities between our culture and Jesus's culture – a culture that Jesus witnessed and actively resisted. We live in a culture whose typical response is violent, a culture where we have easy access to military-grade weapons, and a culture that prioritizes and fetishizes war. While there is no single cause of these tragedies, we cannot let these events become so commonplace that complacency leads to our inaction. As Christians, our baptismal vocation calls us to respond to the blood of God's children so frequently and indiscriminately spilled as a result of gun violence. Therefore, as your pastor, I encourage you to take action.

Finally, in an effort to make sense of this rampage, the term “mental illness” has come center stage. We should be careful when we thrust this phrase into the limelight. It's already the

case that over 75% of people view those with mental illness as dangerous.<sup>1</sup> However, people with mental illness are rarely violent; they account for less than 5% of all violent incidents which include, but are not limited to, firearm violence. In fact, compared to the general population, a person with a serious mental illness is twelve times more likely to be the victim of violence. You see, the stigmatization and lumping of over 200 types of mental illness<sup>2</sup> is alienating close to one-fifth of our adult population and leading to its despair.<sup>3</sup>

In today's gospel, we heard of Jesus's despair in the wilderness. The Greek word for "wilderness" is *eremos*, which literally means lonely, desolate, or deserted. I can't help but think of the experiences of those with mental illness as they struggle to conceal themselves for fear of being labeled "crazy" or "dangerous." Living with a mental illness can feel like a desert, a place where no one understands you and others approach with apprehension.

While Mark's gospel doesn't give us many details about what happened during Jesus's 40 days in the desert, I cannot help but wonder. After all, Jesus was a twenty-something guy forced into a lonely, isolated place. He had grown up with constant exposure to violence; in fact, his adopted parents had to flee as refugees to save him from death (Matthew 2). His mother was a feisty Jewish woman who taught him songs of resistance, insurrection against the government, and the primacy of God's provisions (Luke 1). And at his baptism, Jesus was the only one to hear a strange voice (Mark 1). In that wilderness, I wonder if he was tempted to violently respond to a broken world. I wonder if he thought that the voice at his baptism might be schizophrenia. I wonder how that time of deep loneliness shaped his ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/florida-shooting-raises-awareness-stigma-attached-mental-illness/story?id=53128272>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/recognizing-warning-signs>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers>

While most of us cannot say we've physically lived a desert for 40 days, we have had isolating experiences. Those moments when no one seems to understand us. The times when we try to conceal something about ourselves or our past. Those incidents where we were tormented by outside forces or forces from deep within. We understand the wilderness, and Jesus does too.

But in the wilderness, Jesus wasn't alone. Rather, he lived among, and likely learned from, the wild animals God made. Angels, or better translated as messengers, cared for and ministered to him. In that transitional wilderness, as he wrestled in a dark lonely place, he was not alone. As he worked through that period of life he was transformed. He emerged with a purpose and a better understanding of God's hope for the world.

In Mark's gospel, one of the first things Jesus did was interact with a man who had an "unclean spirit" (Mark 1:23-26). It was a man overcome by an outside force – a power beyond his control. The Bible might call it a demon, and we might call it a mental illness. Instead of fearing the man, instead of criminalizing him, and instead of labeling him as "mentally ill," Jesus walked toward him, spoke to him, and brought healing and wholeness to *both* that man and his community.

So too, our God comes to bring us healing and wholeness. In this gathered community, we see God's love reflected in compassionate conversation and loving actions. At the font, we are reminded of our purpose. We gather at this table to be nourished and sustained by God's holy meal where all are welcome regardless of psychological history. Here, we learn of our God who encounters us with all of our imperfections to remind us that we are loved and valuable.

So, I wonder what it would look like if we too saw healing and wholeness as our ministry. What if instead of demonizing those with mental illness, we began to be the messengers to them in their wilderness. Could we support them as they change medications and find a healthy time to

emerge? Could we advocate for accessible mental healthcare and strive to break the stigma? Might we support organizations like Lutheran Disaster Response that minister to those with mental illness triggered by disaster and despair?

Friends, today's gospel gives us a glimpse of our God who knows the wilderness and meets us in the desert places. During these 40 days of Lent, in this space that reminds us of those places of loneliness, despair, and darkness, let us commit to being reflections of Christ to one another. Let us carefully talk about mental illness, let us be the voice for the voiceless, and let us remember that in the despairing wilderness, God is among us. Amen.