

The Outsiders: the Battle Within

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Luke 8:26-39

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“Be Kind; Everyone You Meet is Fighting a Battle you know nothing about.”

My old neighbor Jen back in Minnesota shared a story recently. She was working as a waitress and late in the evening a young mother with three daughters came in to eat. Jen, the lone waitress on duty, noticed that they seemed especially stressed and anxious. Jen felt the competing pressures of a busy, crowded restaurant and her heart being tugged by this woman’s distressed face. So she decided to drop off some slices of cake saying – “who says you have to have dessert last. Here is a treat on the house tonight. I am busy but I will be with you as soon as possible.”

Later when Jen finally got back to them to take the order she again felt moved by the unidentified stress on the mother’s face and hungry eyes of the girls to cover the cost of their meal out of her tip money. She felt God encouraging her to extend some extra kindness toward this mother. When Jen brought the food she said that it was on the house and hoped she had a better day tomorrow.

The woman was moved to tears and as she left she gave Jen a quick hug thank you and squeezed a hand-written note into her hand. Jen was so busy that she thanked her and pushed the note into her pocket.

At the end of the shift Jen finally stopped to read the note: I lost my job, I have been up since 3 a.m. delivering papers to make ends meet and my boyfriend won’t help us move house. To be honest I was thinking about taking my life tonight! Your kindness changed our lives. Thank you.

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American culture expects us to have life together, to not complain and to always have the strength and resilience to overcome life's struggles. You know that “pull yourself up by the bootstraps, and be a self-made man or woman.” Attitude. But to be honest:

Everyone You Meet is Fighting a Battle you know nothing about, so be kind.

According to NAMI, the National Association of Mental Illness, 1 in 5 people experience a mental illness each year and 1 in 20 experience a severe case of mental illness each year. 12 million people struggle with serious thoughts of suicide in America every year. These numbers are even worse among oppressed, marginalized communities and people facing homelessness or other severe, disruptive life changes.

So what is included in that term Mental Illness according to NAMI? Things like schizophrenia, PTSD, bipolar, borderline personality disorder, ADHD, OCD, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicide, addiction and others. Yes some of the things that you or I may have used to describe our struggles in life but may not name it as Mental Illness.

“Be Kind; Everyone You Meet is Fighting a Battle you know something about, but fear to name it out loud. And be kind to yourself.”

The people of Gersenes lived in a region where fierce and gruesome battles happened a century earlier according to the Historian Josephus, The tombs, the memories of the past trauma of this town, where the Legions tormented the man that others feared. Today we have a better understanding of such generational trauma. Whether it is generational alcoholism, PTSD, abuse or generational and systemic racism that are real even generations later. We know now that extensive trauma can alter a person's DNA and pass on trauma to our children, both genetically and environmentally.

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In Luke 8 Jesus is ministering around the Sea of Galilee and healing lots of people. Then suddenly he tells the disciples that they need to cross over the sea. We don't know why exactly, but it is obvious that Jesus went out of his way to seek out this one person. Someone that others avoided and kept isolated. Jesus goes there to seek out and show compassion toward the man that others tried to push away. We know that ignoring a problem or sending it away to be someone else's problem is not a solution. Yet many cities try to drive out our unhoused citizens or struggle to adequately address their needs. We ignore or mistreat so many who need help to address their struggles.

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Seeking help or helping others work through their own trauma is part of the healing process. Jesus called out the traumas that tortured this man. Even today we understand that naming our trauma and admitting you need help is the first step in receiving help and healing. The motto on the NAMI website is “The first step to getting help is saying it out loud”. Understanding that 1 in 5 people struggle with mental illness in their life helps us to realize that it is all around us. Like Jesus, let us name our struggles to facilitate our own healing and the healing of others. I too speak aloud that I struggled with suicidal thoughts as I worked to accept myself as lesbian when the messages of society and my former faith community told me otherwise. I too have received professional care for anxiety and depression. There is no shame in seeking help and support in those difficult times of life. I too have lost someone to suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, or other mental illnesses. I know family members that live with various mental health conditions today.

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Through insight and understanding Jesus helped restore the man to a more peaceful state of mind. The scripture says, the man was clothed, seated at Jesus feet. He was still naked, but his shame and isolation were covered over by love and healing. He received dignity and acceptance in his struggles as the first step of restoration.

Healing comes in many forms. If we see someone who has lost a limb how do we know they are healed? It is not a return to a former self. It is a return to a former functionality of life that allows joy.

An amputee does not heal when they grow back a limb but when their world around them is adapted to accommodate their new way of functioning in the world that allows them to have joy in life. We make accommodations to their home, their work environment and give them new skills to adapt and live without the use of that body function. The same is true for those with various mental health conditions.

The man in this story felt safe with Jesus, but Jesus knew that part of his healing would come through being restored to his community and sharing his own struggles and healing as a testimony to God's love. In the story we see their fear and understand that part of his healing would come through the community's efforts to accommodate to him coming back into the life of the community. We need to be willing to adapt and support others in their new ways of functioning in the world.

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Let us be kind together.