

Wholehearted Faith: Being Honest in Every Aspect of Your Life

Psalm 111 and Mark 1:21-28

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She is one of the strongest, fiercest, and most independent individuals I know. She married my grandfather when she was 16 and gave birth to my dad when she was 17.

She and Grandpa celebrated their 72nd wedding anniversary before Grandpa died a decade ago.

She has spent her entire life on the family farm. In fact, I'm not sure she has been to more than three states in her life: Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa.

Her blindness prevents her from knowing if it is night or day. She feels her way around the house and depends on the radio in the front room to reorient her whenever she gets turned around. She'll be quick to tell you that she has not been to bed much since Grandpa died, choosing to rest in a large recliner in the front room instead.

"You know, Donna, I've been in this house since 1941," she told me on Tuesday night before adding, "I just cannot believe I am leaving for the final time in the morning."

These final words are the ones that pierced my heart when I phoned her after my dad had called that morning to let me know her worst fear, the thing we prayed would not come to fruition, was scheduled to occur the next day.

Grandma was finally giving up her independence and moving into a nursing home.

After telling me she was still in disbelief about leaving, Grandma shared, "Donna, my children are not as young as they used to be, (something that made me laugh since her oldest child, my dad, is 82) and they are struggling to take care of me. Plus, I've really gone downhill during this last month. I'm no longer steady on my feet and have completely lost my balance. It's time, Donna."

Grandma was finally accepting her reality.

How good are you at doing the same?

To whom do you tell your truth?

Is vulnerability, something Brene Brown defines as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure," a strength you embrace? Or a weakness you avoid when it comes to your friends, your family, and your coworkers?¹

What about when it comes to God?

Do you live as though God intimately knows every feeling that flows through your head, every beat of your heart, every detail of your desires?

Or do you seek to shroud shares of your reality from God, imagining God is too busy counting the number of hairs on your head to notice all that goes on inside you—your hopes and fears, longings and desires, the accomplishments you are proud to post and the locales of your life you labor to lock away?

I wonder what the man featured in today's text has endured before he encountered Jesus. Mark writes that he appeared "just then" but we do not know if he was sitting in the

¹ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham, 2012), 34.

synagogue and stood up, or “just then” walked into the door the house of worship where Jesus is teaching as one with authority, that is with the ability to not only speak but also perform an action.²

The man in the synagogue is described not by what he is wearing or by his accent—but as having an unclean spirit. Duke professor Joel Marcus suggests that a more literal meaning of the original Greek would render the sentence, “man in an unclean spirit,” before adding that “the man’s personality has been so usurped by the demon that the demon has, as it were, swallowed him up.”³

While we might joke that our least favorite politician is demon-possessed or be familiar with movies in which strange little beings run around a subway train, I suspect many of us struggle with the concept of demons. Not knowing what, exactly, I believe about demons is part of why I appreciate Cuban pastor Ofelia Ortega’s teaching on this text when she explains how “In biblical language, ‘impure’ means, simply, contrary to the sacred.” She continues to note how, “All that is against the sanctity of God is considered impure.”⁴ Imagine, then, that this man is enveloped not by something we cannot understand but by something that is not of God as he cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” before naming how he knows that Jesus is the Holy One of God with power to destroy all that is ungodly within him.

Jesus hears the man and does not disappoint him or the reader but instead immediately reveals his authority by rebuking the man before telling the unclean spirit to be silent and come out. A more accurate rendering of the original Greek, *phimotheti*, would be “Hush!” or “Shut your trap” or even “Shut up”—words and phrases we would consider to be brash and rude.

In reflecting on this text, my colleague, James Howell, notes how often God demands silence. The Psalmist suggests that his readers “Be still and know that I am God.” Jesus regularly stills storms, transforming one’s experience of fear into peace. And in 1 Kings 19, Elijah finds God not in the great wind, the earthquake, or the fire but in the sound of sheer silence.

I wonder what Jesus might be seeking to silence today.

What ungodliness within or around us is Jesus hoping to hush?

Perhaps it is the clamor that claims you will never be good enough?

Or the racket that reminds you of the mistake you made in a way that continues to convince you that you will never truly be forgiven?

Or maybe it is the noise that prevents you from hearing who you are at your core—deeply beloved?

What have we taken on, or allowed to envelope us, that is not of God?

Emmy Kegler is the former pastor of a Lutheran Church in Minnesota who now invests her time as a mother and writer. Referring to herself as both a pastor and patient, Kegler writes most often about mental health to normalize “experiences of depression, anxiety, and a host of other diagnoses and symptoms, treating them not as proof of exclusion from God’s grace but rather a common and expansive experience of the human condition in which God remains present and compassionate.” Her book, *All Who Are Weary*, resonated deeply with her teaching on addiction being particularly powerful to me.

² Joel Marcus, *The Anchor Bible, Mark 1-8* (New York, Random House, 2000), 191.

³ Marcus, 191.

⁴ Ofelia Ortega, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2008), 310.

Kegler writes how AA might not be the only answer for where to go when one is ready to face an addiction as “the admission of powerlessness, particularly within historically marginalized groups, can aggravate experiences of distress and self-hatred.”⁵ She proceeds to name some of the gifts offered by our Christian faith for approaching addiction. “We live in a long faith history of recognizing that, as individuals or as an interrelated society, we need some form of calling to repentance and transformation, some kind of grace for when we fail.” She continues, “In twelve-step programs, half of the program is focused on where we have harmed others and how we can make amends for it. Can you imagine if half of every Christian worship service was dedicated to unflinching inventories of where each person had hurt someone else and how, exactly, they wanted to make it right?”⁶ She elaborates:

“Not how we as a collective had all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...what if each person stopped and took stock of how they could fix what they had broken, and what they had to do to not do it again? (I suspect our attendance would go down.) Our practiced and proclaimed faith would radically transform if we allowed ourselves to be brutally and humbly honest about what felt empty and unfulfilled and terrifying within us, and then refused the simple solutions offered by either substance use or surface-level faith.”⁷

How long would it take for us—for you and me—to identify what feels empty, unfulfilled, and terrifying within us?

Can you imagine naming these empty, unfulfilled places aloud?

Can you picture presenting them to Jesus and allowing Jesus to rebuke, silence, and cast them out of you?

Today’s sermon is the third in our series inspired by an Instagram post from *The Guardian* titled, “45 Tiny Changes to Transform Your Life.” Someone rightly pointed out how the changes are not so tiny but rather ones that require significant courage and discipline—including or especially change number 31 which reads, “Being honest in every area of your life.”

Many of you are aware that I returned to therapy last summer for the first time since seminary. Prior to doing so, I regularly asked friends about their experiences. “How does a session begin?” “Are the same questions asked each time?” Many months later, now find myself logging on to Zoom with a list of things I want to talk about, sometimes begging my therapist to please probe more deeply as I know that the more honest I am with myself, the more likely I am to experience healing. Withholding my truth, on the other hand, is a barrier to my being made well.

What, then, might it look like to bring all I am feeling and thinking to Jesus—to literally approach prayer with the boldness of the man with the unclean spirit and ask Jesus to help me see what fear needs to be silenced and what behavior needs to change?

What would it look like to approach God, as the Psalmist who penned Psalm 111 does, with “my whole heart” remembering how “The term ‘heart’ refers metaphorically to the inner

⁵ Emmy Kegler, *All Who Are Weary* (Broadleaf: Minneapolis, 2021), 143.

⁶ Kegler, 145.

⁷ Kegler, 145.

self, the source of a person's thoughts and feelings"—the "seat of reason, understanding, and imagination"?⁸

What if believing that we are already intimately known by God who wants to walk with us is the only path to being set free?

Kegler closes her book, *All Who Are Weary*, with a chapter on self-care in which she writes about people, practices, and places we can turn to for care—a list that includes sharing time with people who know us well, professionals, and rest. She then adds, "I also need Jesus." "I need Jesus because when my unhealthy mind tells me I have absolutely ruined everything, when my heart beats a message that no one can ever love me, I cling with white-knuckled hands to the promise that there is no one unlovable, there is no one irredeemable. Every time I recognize that the bar across my shoulders is the heavy one I was supposed to leave behind, I remember too that each of my days is a fresh start."⁹

Perhaps we do not need to set the bar down on our own but instead come as close to Jesus as we can only to find how every day can include a fresh start.

I've spent the last few days wondering how often Grandma was tempted to say, "It is time to no longer live so independently," before summoning the strength needed to continue to remain by herself on the farm.

I've pondered how many times she sat in a chair amazed that her feet had carried her from the kitchen to the front room once again. I've thought about her rummaging through the refrigerator to find what she was looking to have for lunch and being grateful her fingers led her to the right Tupperware container. And I have marveled at her courage and capacity to vulnerably name her truth—where she is and what she now needs, even as articulating this truth means letting go of so much of what she most loves.

What do you and I need to sit down?

Where do we need to ask for help?

Where is Jesus longing to set us free?

May we, too, have the courage to name our truth—no matter how frightening that truth might be.

⁸ Christine Roy Yoder, *Feasting on the Word*, 297 and 299.

⁹ Kegler, 203.