

**The Gospel According to the Olympics 2: Mental Health**  
**Luke 8:26-39**  
**September 22, 2024**  
**Rev. Kelley Becker**

**[\\*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0-vMUApyJQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0-vMUApyJQ)**

That was Simone Biles' final vault at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo (which took place in 2021). Biles withdrew from the women's team final, later expressing the need to protect her mental well-being. In this video, we could hear her telling her teammates that she was fine. How many of us have said that, when the truth was or is, we are anything but fine.

In an interview later, she talked about what happened.

**[\\*https://www.tiktok.com/@realifestudios/video/7397475399120227617?lang=en](https://www.tiktok.com/@realifestudios/video/7397475399120227617?lang=en)**  
**(03:15-04:51)**

Biles was suffering from the twisties, a mental block that caused her to lose herself in the air when she attempted to twist. She described the twisties as a disconnect between the mind and body. She compared it to getting in a car to drive, something you've been doing practically your whole life, and your body being unable to do it. I cannot imagine how scary that would have been. And amid that fear and the very real truth that she was lucky she wasn't badly injured, all she could think about was what a huge disappointment she was to her team, her nation, and even the world.

Since this incident, Biles and other athletes like swimmer Michael Phelps, have talked a lot about the importance of mental health, not only for athletes but for all of us. They've encouraged us to download helpful apps and take our mind's health seriously. This has taken courage because, historically, mental illness, unlike physical illness, has been something people have tried to hide. Even today, there is a stigma attached to mental illness that doesn't exist for illnesses like diabetes and cancer.

When we hear someone has cancer, we rally around them and offer to bring meals, mow their lawn, and take care of their children. When we find out someone has a mental illness we very often don't respond so well. Mental illness is harder for us to see, especially in a world in which the right answer to, "How are you?" is "Fine." Our lack of response or poor response to people who struggle with their mental health ends up isolating them. This isolation makes recovery even more challenging.

It's important to note that keeping people with mental illnesses at arm's length is not new. In the Bible, there are stories about people afflicted with demons. Having the benefit of science and research, most scholars associate these stories of demon possession with mental illness. Today's text is one example of this. It is part of a string of stories in the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus exhibits his authority over natural and supernatural forces. This story follows the story of Jesus and his disciples in a boat,

weathering a storm. In that story, Jesus calmed the storm with just his words. After that, Jesus and crew continue their journey across the sea, presumably with smooth sailing. This is Luke 8:26-39.

<sup>26</sup> Then they arrived at the region of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. <sup>27</sup> As he stepped out on shore, a man from the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had not worn any clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. <sup>28</sup> When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him, shouting, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me," <sup>29</sup> for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) <sup>30</sup> Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion," for many demons had entered him. <sup>31</sup> They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

<sup>32</sup> Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding, and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. <sup>33</sup> Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd stampeded down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

<sup>34</sup> When the people caring for the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. <sup>35</sup> Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they became frightened. <sup>36</sup> Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. <sup>37</sup> Then the whole throng of people of the surrounding region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. <sup>38</sup> The man from whom the demons had gone out begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, <sup>39</sup> "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

There is a lot to unpack in this story. First, upon meeting Jesus, the man who was being tormented by demons begged Jesus not to torment him further. You'd think if the man knew anything at all about Jesus, and it sounds like he did. He called him, "Jesus, Son of the Most High God." We don't know exactly what the author was trying to tell us about this guy, but I wonder if he was drawing attention to our very human desire to stay with what is familiar to us. The man was used to things the way they were. And as bad as things were, perhaps the man was more afraid of the unknown. Fear is powerful.

And the people who, upon seeing the man dressed and well, asked Jesus to leave. What was that about? Again...probably fear. Maybe they were thinking that if Jesus really did have control over the sea and the demons, they should be afraid of him. Perhaps Jesus was too good to be true. After all, there wasn't much good going on in their lives.

We need to remember that in the background of this story and all the stories of Jesus' life, is Roman occupation. The psychological impact of Roman oppression would have had consequences. More than 2000 years later, we can look back and see that over and over again colonization has negatively affected the ones who have been colonized. The Israelites were no different.

In his book, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan compares this story of demon possession in Luke 8 with a report from anthropologist, Barrie Reynolds, on the British colonization of the Lunda-Luvale tribes in South Central Africa in the late 1800s. "He observed that the tribes' shamans had to exorcise a new and dangerous spirit that had possessed and tormented people. They called this spirit "bindele," which is the Luvale word for *European*."<sup>1</sup> In this story, Jesus asked the Gerasene man his name and he replied, "Legion." In the first-century Roman-occupied world, *legion* was the name of a fleet of Roman soldiers. We don't know anything else about the man who is called Legion in this story, but what we do know is that at the story's core is the belief that Roman oppression and the mental torment this man was experiencing were intricately connected. Today we would use the word "trauma" to talk about and say that the trauma of oppression was linked to this man's mental illness. At some point, being constantly afraid or constantly under extreme stress changed him.

Elite athletes report that kind of stress. There is not room for error. Their training schedule is rigorous. Their sponsors expect them to look good, perform well, and smile, even when their bodies are injured and exhausted. There is no room for a mental health crisis. Simone Biles has talked about the twisties that came out of nowhere, with no warning. One minute everything was fine, the next she was lost in the air and dropping out of the most important competition of her life, certain everyone in the world hated her. Sadly, she cared more about what other people would think than she did about her own well-being.

In October 2021, a couple of months after her withdrawal from the Olympics, Biles was interviewed on the Today Show and admitted that she was still scared to do gymnastics. As she worked through her own pain, she became an advocate for people with mental illness, stressing above all else, the need to reach out for help. She and others have talked about the human tendency to think we can and should do everything by ourselves. And the truth is, sometimes we just can't.

Biles has talked publicly about the importance of seeking help from professionals, going to therapy, being open to treatment options, and prioritizing our own mental and physical well-being over the wants, needs, and opinions of other people. We are fortunate in Bartlesville that mental health care is accessible to everyone. Both Grand Mental Health and Samaritan Counseling offer services to people regardless of their

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<sup>1</sup> <https://enfleshed.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/June19subs.pdf>, accessed 9/20/24.

ability to pay. If you are struggling, know that you are not alone. Please do not be afraid to reach out to either of those organizations or to me or Anna. There is nothing more important than your health.

I think it's important to talk about this in faith communities. Studies on the relationship between mental illness and the Church have found that beliefs and practices within the Church can contribute to stigma toward people with mental illness. Too many congregations hold certain attitudes and theological beliefs that fail to promote a sense of belonging for people who have a mental health diagnosis. At times, the Church seems more like the people who bound the Garasene man with chains and shackles than Jesus who offered him compassion and healing.

In one sample of a study on the perception of mental illness in churches, researchers found that "41% of those with a serious mental illness were told [by the church] that they did not have a mental disorder, especially those who attended church more than once a week and were from conservative and/or charismatic churches (Stanford & McAlister, 2008)<sup>2</sup>." In another sample, "30% of people with a mental disorder reported having had a negative experience within the church, including being abandoned, being accused of having a demon, or being told that sin was the cause of their illness (Stanford, 2007)<sup>3</sup>". Legion's story reminds us that if we are going to claim to follow the ways of Jesus, we cannot meet mental illness or any illness with isolation, accusations, and lies.

The people of Gerasa attempted to solve their problems by casting out individuals like Legion. This happens all the time. Communities, including faith communities, avoid confronting very real problems by scapegoating a person or group of people. We deal with poverty by villainizing the homeless population. We deal with crime by villainizing people of color. We deal with poor immigration policies by villainizing undocumented immigrants. We deal with healthcare accessibility by villainizing sick people. Poverty, crime, poor policy, and accessible healthcare are the problems. People are not the problems. Let me say that again...people are not problems.

There isn't a single problem we have in the world that cannot be made better by compassion, both self-compassion and compassion for one another, and community. It is often in the midst of community that we discover that mental illness is a liar. It tells us that we aren't good enough. It tells us nobody cares and that we are better off alone. It tells us that people cannot possibly love us just for us. Simone Biles found out her mental illness was lying to her. She is much more to her fans, to the world than being the greatest gymnast. This is what she posted on her social media accounts after her withdrawal from the Games. "the outpouring of love & support I've received

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<sup>2</sup> Stanford MS, McAlister KR. Perceptions of serious mental illness in the local church. *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*. 2008;12(2):144–153.

<sup>3</sup> Stanford MS. Demon or disorder: A survey of attitudes toward mental illness in the Christian church. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*. 2007;10(5):445–449.

has made me realize I'm more than my accomplishments and gymnastics which I never truly believed before."

There are times in our lives when we forget who we are and we need other people to remind us. So, just in case you are having one of those seasons: You are more than your successes. And you are more than your failures. You are more than your health and more than your disease. You are more than your age or abilities or IQ. You are a reflection of the Holy in this world. You are worth taking care of and if you need help doing that, there is help...I promise.

At the Paris Olympics, the whole world watched a different Simone Biles from the person they saw in Tokyo. We watched someone who learned that self-care must be a priority and she learned those things take work. Self-care is more than a candlelit bubble bath and a massage, though those things are delightful.

Self-care is sometimes the hard work of therapy and it is learning to

- say no (or yes) when appropriate.
- handling conflicts directly and honestly.
- taking a break when necessary.
- living a life based on values.
- showing up with presence and courage.
- setting healthy boundaries.
- practicing compassion, compassion, compassion
- actively engaging in your life.

In a nutshell, self-care is pausing and listening to YOU and what YOU need. And believing yourself. It is likely your body is telling you what you need. Listen to it. And that takes practice. That takes Olympics-level practice.

In Paris this summer, we listened as Simone Biles talked about the importance of mental health and self-care. We listened as she talked about self-care being part of her training. And we watched her succeed.

**[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR\\_yTJk0VII](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR_yTJk0VII)**  
**0:03-0:43**

In an interview after the Olympics was over, she said, "After all these years of putting the mental work in," she continued, "it's paid off." That's worth more than gold. My hope for DCC is that we will be a community that not only practices compassion for one another, but a community of people who practice self-compassion and who understand that the time we spend caring for ourselves is not only a gift to ourselves and our families, but to the world. Right now, the world needs us at our best. The world needs us at our most compassionate. Bartlesville needs DCC at its best. You are loved, dear ones...more than you know.