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Mental Health Sunday: a pastoral apology  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
May 3, 2026  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 8:26-39 and John 14:1-14

This week we celebrate Mental Health Sunday. Mental Health Sunday is celebrated on the first Sunday in May. According to the United Church of Canada web site, the stated purpose of this event is to be “part of the church’s effort to create communities of radical belonging for all people, including those living with mental health challenges.”<sup>1</sup> You'll notice I say mental health rather than mental illness. We all have mental health, just as we all have physical health. This conversation matters to everyone.

But I should say that this is a fairly new celebration. The United Church of Canada first recognized Mental Health Sunday in 2021. That’s only 5 years ago. It took that long for the United Church of Canada to formally recognize this need in our own communities. Of course, the United Church of Canada had already created a variety of initiatives to partner with those living with mental health challenges prior to that. But the subject was largely not discussed during worship until quite recently.

And on the one hand - I understand that. Our society is largely reluctant to have real conversations about mental health. And our churches - who are made up of ordinary people - have simply brought that silence into the sanctuary.

Consider this. Many people speak openly about physical illnesses, like cancer, or diabetes. We speak very openly about visible injuries - like when we see someone using crutches. But most people are far less likely to speak openly about their mental health needs. And when they are willing to share about their mental health challenges, people will speak to a small group of trusted friends about “socially acceptable” mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, or dementia. But I have observed that most people shy away completely from talking about conditions like schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and any type of eating disorder.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://united-church.ca/worship-special-days/mental-health-sunday>

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So why do we make such a distinction between physical health and mental health? One common reason given is that we respond more to visible conditions - like a broken arm. Many mental health challenges are often invisible. Well, that is true enough.

But I believe that we also avoid the topic of mental health for other reasons. And some of those reasons come from what the Church has taught for centuries. Some of those reasons come straight from the pages of the Bible. So we should talk about mental health during worship. And we should have talked about this long ago.

Consider our reading from Luke this morning. But actually, before we discuss Luke, we need to remember how little was understood about mental health 2000 years ago. Or even 200 years ago. In the year 1840 a census in the US contained a single question about mental health. The question was “are you insane? By 1880 the census had expanded to include questions about 7 specific identifiable mental health conditions. By the year 2000 there were 365 diagnostic categories in use. Not in a census, but for research around mental health. We expect and we demand a lot of specificity when we deal with physical health. But our understanding of mental health has massively lacked behind. It is finally catching up. But 2000 year ago, there was no real understanding of mental health.

The story in Luke is about Jesus helping a person whose mental health had been devastated. But when Luke was written, there was essentially zero understanding of mental health by modern standards. So we should expect to see laid bare society’s mis-conceptions about mental health. And the story does not disappoint there. In fact, the reading itself lays out pretty clearly many mis-conceptions of the day. And sadly, those mis-conceptions around mental health persisted for centuries, and were adopted by the Church.

The story is presented as a story of healing. At the beginning of the story the man - who calls himself “legion”, is living naked in the tombs, inhabited by demons. Jesus commands the demons to come out of the man. And by the end of the story, the man is sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind. If we ignore all the details, it is simply a story about Jesus healing a person. Actually - I just lied. The story did not actually end with the man sitting at Jesus’s feet. The story - and the healing - actually

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ended when the man went back to his village and was accepted by his own community. The healing was complete when the man was finally accepted in his own home.

This story has lots of other details though. And some of those details reveal unspoken attitudes about people who lived with mental health challenges back in Jesus's day. And I invite us to all consider how many of these attitudes still persist today in our own society. And yes, even in our churches.

Perhaps the most interesting detail in the story is the presence of demons. The man is seen as out of his own mind because he has been inhabited by numerous demons. Do we believe in demons today? That's a real question. Because I suspect that some of us do, and others of us do not. For this conversation, it doesn't really matter though. The point of the demons in the story is to support attitudes towards mental health. Well, what do demons have to do with it?

The idea that the man's mental health challenges were caused by demons is a way to externalize those challenges. In the story as written, the demons are in control. The man is in some ways an innocent victim of the demons. But the story is a bit more disturbing than that. In Jesus's day the purity culture that existed pushed the demon idea further. The demons would have been seen as sent by God. Why? Well, to punish the man of course. The man had - obviously - committed some grave sin. So God was punishing the man, using demons to ruin the man's mental health. The thinking was that the mental health challenge was actually the man's fault. And if God thinks that the man should be punished, then the local community thought that they should also punish the man. Which is why the man was living in the tombs, away from the village, away from his friends, away from "normal society".

Whether or not you believe in demons today, I would say that our society still largely responds to people who live with mental health challenges in the same ways. We frequently shun people who struggle with mental health. And we often blame them - in our own minds at least - for their own mental health challenges. And that type of lazy thinking and narrow-minded theology allows us to sit back and do nothing.

If you think I'm being harsh, consider this. When we see a person who is suffering from cancer, or diabetes, we usually feel sorry for them, and perhaps offer to

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help if we can. But how often do we see someone who is living with mental health challenges - perhaps depression - and we do not offer any help. Even worse, we think - in our own minds if not out loud - can't that person just "get over it"? Today we do often both isolate and blame people living with mental health challenges. Have we made any real progress in 2000 years?

Another interesting detail in this story is fear. The villagers experience fear. Twice! At the beginning of the story the villagers live in fear that the man would hurt them or himself. And after Jesus heals the man, the villagers are even more afraid. Quote, "Then people came out to see what had happened ... they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid." The villagers lived in fear because they did not understand the man, or the healing. Today, we still often fear people living with mental health challenges. A fear that is based on our own attitudes, not based on reality.

One more detail in the story. We never learn what the man's name actually is. He calls himself "legion" because of the many demons that inhabit him at the beginning of the story. But he is still a man. A person who is loved by his family. He still has a name. And yet, he has taken on a name based on his condition. Sadly, we frequently still do that ourselves today. We expect a person living with mental health challenges to become that condition. A person who is depressed becomes - in our minds - a depressive. A person who suffers from alcohol addiction becomes - in our minds - an alcoholic. The list goes on. But people are not defined by their condition. They are still people. They are still loved. They are still children of God.

And now, I want to offer an apology. I want to apologize on behalf of the church. I apologize for centuries of not taking people who struggle with mental health challenges seriously. For rejecting and ejecting them from our communities while our communities preached love, healing, and inclusion. I apologize for centuries of insisting that God is punishing people who live with mental health challenges while we preached that God loves everyone. For supporting the idea that people who live with mental health challenges deserve to suffer ... while we preach that everyone deserves healing and hope. I apologize for centuries of allowing our own fears to restrict our ability to see all people

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as children of a God of love, community, and inclusion. I apologize for all of that.

And to those of you that the church has not managed to chase away .... Thank you for being here. Thank you for being you. Thank you for being the gift that you are, just as you are.

As I said earlier, the stated purpose of Mental Health Sunday in the United Church of Canada is to be “part of the church’s effort to create communities of radical belonging for all people, including those living with mental health challenges.”

That sounds lovely. But what do we actually mean by “radical belonging”. Ancient purity laws said that if you did not fit physical or mental norms, you did not belong. You were therefore ejected from the community. Today, we think differently.

Purity laws essentially tried to force conformity on everyone. Assuming that everyone had the same desires, needs, and expectations. Today, we are invited to be our own selves in this community of faith. Today, each of us are allowed to come in the door as we are. Each one of us are unique. Each one of us should be accepted and loved - just as you are. Just as we are.

Which is why I selected that reading from John today. I often use this reading at funerals. I particularly like to use it at funerals where the deceased is not a member of a church. And that’s because of a single line.

[image: quote below]

I’d like us all to reflect on the line, “In my father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” What does that line suggest to you? What do you think of that image that in God’s house there are many dwelling places? In particular, what do these “dwelling places” look like?

[image: suburbs]

Do you think of a cookie-cutter suburban landscape where there are many dwellings, and they are all identical to each other?

[image: different houses]

Or do you think that there are many dwelling places because these dwelling places are all unique. Do you think that the dwellings are as radically different as each of us are. And each dwelling place is designed to fit the person that you are.

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When I read those words, the image that comes to my mind is that there are many different types of dwelling places. And the dwellings are different because we are all different. And I love the idea that we do not all have to fit the same mould in order to be loved by God. Because different is ok. Even if your difference is that you live with mental health challenges. Different is ok. You are ok here.

[image: bird flying out of cage]

I'd like to end by reflecting on the image of the week. What do you see in this image?

I see a bird leaving a cage. But it's more than that. The bird is full of colour and hard to categorize. It is unique. The bird displays hope, energy, light, and love. The cage looks somewhat ornate, but might also be rusting away. The cage may be a relic of sometime in our past. The open door is simply an open door. It does not need to be forced open. The bird did not need help to open the door. It simply had to fly. And the bird is not only leaving the cage, it is heading towards the light. It is ascending. It is free. It is joyful.

I created this image this week (with help from ChatGPT) to represent the relationship between mental health and the church. The cage was the church's attempt to trap people who live with mental health challenges. The cage represents the idea that God wants to punish people who suffer from mental health challenges. The cage represents the church's desire to reject and eject people from the community.

The open door is freedom. Or perhaps forgiveness. Or perhaps my apology. Or perhaps something else. The open door is whatever was a barrier between captivity and liberation. And the bright light that the bird is flying towards is belonging. Connection. Caring. Community. Home.

The cage was harmful to all of us. Obviously, it hurt those of us who were locked in the cage. But it also hurt those of us who were told that it was our job to close and lock the door. When we exclude people, we do not only punish them. We also make ourselves smaller. We diminish ourselves. We ourselves decide to live with more fear. We become less of what the creator intended.

Liberation from the cage is something we all benefit from. That bird that is flying towards the light could be any of us. It could be all of us. Together. That is what

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belonging is all about.

You are not alone. You are welcome here. Just as you are.

*Amen.*