

Out of his mind

“Jesus’ family went out to restrain him, because people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” Mark 3:21

I don’t know what Jesus was doing that made people think he was going crazy, but whatever it was, it makes me feel better. Because more often than I want to admit, I feel like I’m coming unglued, too. That’s not good for a clergy person, because we’re supposed to have our acts together.

Many years ago, a colleague of mine in the priesthood decided to leave parish ministry. It was a big deal, because she was well-known, much-loved, and very highly regarded. I wrote and asked her what it was like to be out of parish work, and she wrote back, “I don’t think you really want to know.” She said, “When I go to the grocery store now, I don’t worry that if I’m not smiling, somebody’s conception of God is going to get messed up.” That was just the beginning.

Sometimes when I get together with clergy who are still active in parish ministry, I feel like I’m in a club of liars. We clergy are like this with each other – we tend to talk about how great things are in our churches, about how we love everything about our work. If I believed my colleagues were telling me the truth all the time, I’d get really depressed.

And I know clergy aren’t the only ones. Get a group of moms or dads together, and the usual topics are about how great the kids are doing, or about some sort of fabulous family event. But we all know there are two sides to every human life – there’s the side you put on your resume, and there’s the side you only tell your therapist.

But once in a while, a person crosses the boundary and tells the truth. That’s when they send for your family to come and get you.

When I was still in my 20’s and rector of a little church in Eastern Tennessee, I led a three-part Sunday forum series that I called “Christian perspectives on money, sex, and power.” I had no business leading such a series. What could I possibly know about these things except what some theologian had written in a book, especially when I only was in my 20’s? But my church was full of young people in their 20’s and 30’s, and the topic of money, sex, and power got a lot of people to show up every week.

It was a thoroughly forgettable series, except for the second session. I made some remarks about love and marriage, as if I knew what I was talking about, and that’s when a young woman raised her hand. When I called on her, she didn’t address me, she addressed the 100 or so other people in the room.

“I love it here,” she said. “I come here every Sunday. But I just have to say, I look around at all of you every week, and you all seem to be doing so well, your kids are so put together, your

families seem happy. But I think being married is really hard; a lot of the time, I don't know if we're going to make it."

I'm sure some people thought she was out of her mind.

And you can imagine the awkward silence. This isn't the way we talk in groups; this is when you send for that woman's family to come and get her. But then, out of that awkward silence, a lone voice spoke tentatively from the other side of the room, "You mean, you feel that way, too?"

And that's when I felt a sense of Presence, the presence of forgiveness, a kind of healing, and peace. I think that's the first time I felt in my body what Jesus meant when he looked around at the crowd that day, and gesturing toward them asked rhetorically, "Who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters?"

On the one hand, everybody knows there are two sides to life – one for your resume and the other for your therapist. But more and more I think a big part of the power and magnetism of Jesus is that he showed us what it can look like when you decide to live an undivided life. When you decide it's too hard and too unhealthy to keep hiding the truth on the inside. Because a house divided against itself can't stand.

I sometimes hate it when people realize I don't have it all together. But when I am able to stop living a divided life, when I can stop pretending, it's usually a little easier to sleep at night. And once in a while, a lone voice will speak up and say, "I thought it was just me." That's when I can sense a kind of Presence – the presence of forgiveness, that peculiar peace and healing power of two or three who are gathered in his name.