

“What Is This?”

Rev. Debra P. Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
February 1, 2015

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Mark 1:21-28

Have you ever been addicted to drugs or alcohol, or been close to someone who is? Most of us have. What do you think causes addiction? Is it easy access to drugs, or a chemical reaction in our bodies? Or is something more going on?

The other week I read an article* about some new research on addiction. For a long time, ideas about addiction were based on a famous experiment where rats were put in a cage, alone, with two bottles of water. One bottle was plain water, while the other was laced with heroin or cocaine. Almost every time, the rat would become obsessed with the drugged water, and keep coming back for more and more until it killed him.

The lesson seems to be obvious. If people have easy access to drugs, they will become addicted and ruin their lives. And so our nation waged a War on Drugs, using military intervention to reduce the supply and transfer of illegal drugs, and arresting people caught with even small amounts on them. Our nation now spends billions of dollars every year on drug-related law-enforcement. And over the last 30 years, the prison population has increased 1000%. We now have an incarceration rate second only to North Korea. But people here are still ruining their lives with drugs.

Did you notice anything about that rat experiment? The rats were in a cage alone, with nothing to do but sit and drink water. What would happen if the environment was different? Recently someone designed a similar experiment, but with a different kind of cage, kind of like a rat theme-park, with lots of tunnels to scamper through, trinkets to play with, good food, and other rats to keep them company, plus the two different bottles of water. What do you think happened? *Those rats* drank less than a quarter of the drugged water, and *none of them* died. The rats that were alone, bored and unhappy became heavy users and destroyed themselves with drugs. But none of the rats who were with other rats in a healthy environment did.

Now people are much more complicated than rats. But here's a real life human illustration of the same idea.* During the Vietnam War, some 20% of US soldiers became addicted to heroin while serving in Vietnam. And people here were terrified of what this would mean when they came home. How were we to deal with a sudden influx of addicts? But in fact, 95% of the addicted soldiers stopped using when they returned, many of them without even going through rehab. Why? These men had been living in a terrifying environment. As their environment improved, so did their drug use.

What does this teach us about addiction? Should we spend our resources and energy controlling the supply of drugs and isolating people in prison? Or should we focus on what's going on in people's lives, and seek restoration and healing?

Susan read from the gospel of Mark this morning, the first story after Jesus called his disciples. He was teaching in a synagogue when a man with an “unclean” spirit burst in, interrupted him and yelled, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

Here is a man who was deeply troubled and labeled as unclean. In ancient times, people did not understand illness. Many people believed that if someone was sick, either mentally or physically, it was because of an evil spirit. And anyone who acted crazy, or behaved in a way people didn’t understand, was believed to be possessed. A demon could make you unclean, that is, not fit to associate with other people or to come near to God. A person with an unclean spirit was isolated from the community, and excluded from worship.

How do we make sense of this today? It’s possible to see this as an actual alien spirit in opposition to God that took over this man’s life. But we can also understand it as mental illness. Just as Jesus would heal someone who was physically ill, or blind or deaf, so he healed this man. Or it could be like people who hear voices. Many people hear a voice that says things like, “You’re so stupid.” Or, “You’re so ugly.” Or, “Everybody hates you.” It doesn’t really matter whether the voice is a literal voice, or just a silent message. But it could be that demons are simply those voices that tell us lies, that tell us we’re something that we’re not. They might tell us we are worthless. Or they might tell us we are amazing superstars that can do whatever we want. It becomes demonic if we believe those voices, because when we believe them, they get us to disregard our own true selves. An unclean spirit is whatever distorts who we are and separates us from other people, and from God.

Mark sets the theme for his gospel by beginning the story of Jesus’ ministry with this exorcism. This is different from the other gospels.** Matthew begins with the Sermon on the Mount, showing Jesus as a great teacher. Luke begins with Jesus proclaiming good news to the poor. And John begins with Jesus turning water into wine, showing the abundant life God desires for all of us. But Mark begins with Jesus breaking through the barriers between clean and unclean, good and evil, to bring healing and restore a man to a healthy relationship with himself, with others and with God.

The people were amazed and asked, “What is this? A new teaching with authority.” Jesus did not respond to sickness and need by ignoring the man, isolating or trying to control him. Instead Jesus pulled the man out of his cage of isolation, restored his humanity, and his communion with other people and God, where he could partake of the joyful abundance of God’s reign.

And isn’t this what wisdom (and research) tells us about addiction? Isolating or punishing people only makes things worse. That doesn’t mean you should let someone walk all over you, or make it easy for them to use. But true healing comes when a person can recover their own true self, and connect to others in meaningful ways. That’s what 12-step programs have been doing all along. They start with a confession of a person’s

need for others, and then set about repairing and building healthy relationships with other people and with God.

Amal read from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians today. Apparently there was a disagreement in the early church over whether it was OK to socialize in a pagan temple, or buy and eat meat that had been part of a pagan ritual. Some said that Christians should have nothing to do with idol worship, so they could NOT eat in the temple or even buy the leftover food in the market place. But others said that it didn't matter, since idols had no real existence. They weren't *worshipping* the idols by socializing in the temple or eating their food, so it was no threat to their faith.

Paul agreed with them. They were certainly free to eat the food. But this was not about having superior knowledge or being right. It was about caring for each other, and refraining from doing something that might confuse others or cause them to stumble. Just because you have the freedom to do something doesn't mean you should. Love is more important than being right or free. We are to think about and do what's best for the whole community, especially those who are weak or in some kind of need.

Today many of you brought cans of soup or other food items for Souper Bowl Sunday. This has nothing to do with football, and everything to do with our sense of community. Now, one or two cans of soup are not going to end poverty. We need much more than charity to do that. But it is a small gesture of thoughtfulness and care, a recognition that people are struggling, and an attempt to create a kinder and more welcoming environment.

“What is this? It's a new teaching, with authority.” May we walk in the way of Jesus, and in all things work for reconciliation, healing and love. Amen.

* “The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, and It Is Not What You Think,” by Johann Hari, the Huffington Post, January 20, 2015. (Hari is the author of “Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs.”)

** credit to David Lose, “First Things First,” at <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-4-b/>.