

“Is it demons?”

My first experience of Holy Comforter occurs during discernment for ordination. The Diocese requires each discernment group to spend ten Wednesday evenings there.

On my second evening, I talk with a young woman I met the previous week. Then she told of a trip to Russia and Eastern Europe with her twin sister before the collapse of the Soviet Union. On this evening, she brings several commemorative pins from the trip. After showing them to others, she comes to me, and she tells me about the pins.

Unprompted, she tells me about her illness and her medication. She says she has “schizoid affective disorder, a combination of schizophrenia and bipolar affective disorder.” She says that people with her disorder are more aware of the effects of their illness than persons with only schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. She describes her bouts of depression, episodes a racing mind, and hearing voices. Her problems over the last few days give her reason to fear that she might become distressed before the evening is over.

As I listen, she describes, quite dispassionately, an incident in which her former husband took her to his church for an exorcism. She went with him reluctantly. She says, quite matter-of-factly, that she did not like the experience and found it “humiliating.” The conversation moves on.

The entire conversation with this young woman fascinates me, but the word “humiliating” hits me hard. She is intelligent, keenly aware of her illness and its symptoms, and hungry to be understood. She is no less susceptible to the humiliation of stigma and demonization than others with a mental illness.

Over my years at Holy Comforter, the issue of demons recurs. Once, a regular worshipper reports that she and others from her group home were taken to another church where “the service lasted six hours” and “they said we have demons.” Smiling broadly, she adds, “I like this church better.”

At another time, a young police officer, who has come as a part of a NAMI Crisis Intervention Training Class, takes me aside and asks, “Is this demon possession?” He speaks from a lifetime of hearing the Bible in our Bible-Belt metropolis. The aim of the visit is to expose these first responders to people with mental illness outside of a crisis to help them see past the stigma. To get past stigmatizing, this officer must grapple with how he reads the Bible, as we will as with the usual ignorance of mental illness.

How to read the Bible’s stories about demon possession is beyond the scope of this little story. It is enough to say that however we read the stories they afford no excuse for stigmatizing people with mental illness, as if the illness is their doing. Jesus never blames people for their suffering. He loves them and heals them, and he embraces their suffering and its stigma.

Mike Tanner