

Resistance and Healing

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UMC Geneva

Nadia Bolz-Weber is something else. She certainly breaks the mold – or, better yet, shatters it – when it comes to being an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. With forearms covered in tattoos of Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, and the women who stayed with Jesus during the crucifixion - and a vocabulary as colorful as any sailor's...she's certainly an unlikely candidate for church planting in Denver, Colorado. Raised in a fundamentalist Christian home in Colorado Springs, she started getting those tattoos at age 17, left home, dropped out of college, then moved to Denver where she became an alcoholic and drug abuser. She felt like an "outsider" in society.

Nadia heard God's call to ministry in 2004 when she was asked to eulogize a friend who had committed suicide. A graduate of the United Methodist Church's Iliff Seminary in Denver, she was ordained in 2008. She started her church, the House for all Sinners and Saints (gotta love it!), with eight people in her living room. It grew to over six hundred members, but an article in the New Yorker magazine informs us she recently left the church to avoid founders syndrome. (1) That way the church could flourish without her. In constant demand as a speaker, she currently pursues ministry as a best-selling author and a public theologian.

Her website succinctly states that, "She writes and speaks about personal failing, recovery, grace, faith and whatever else she wants to. She always sits in the corner with the other weirdos." (2) So, Pastor Nadia can certainly identify with the demon-possessed man in today's scripture reading who found himself in a worship service in church, no doubt feeling like an outsider.

You know, some of us don't know quite what to do with scripture passages that speak of unclean spirits and demon possession. We discussed this briefly in our Spirits & Studies group this past week as we are discussing Pastor Nadia's best-selling book *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. In a chapter titled "Frances," Nadia confesses that she doesn't always know what to do with biblical texts about demons. With our western, scientific mind-set, she wonders if these biblical stories actually describe medical conditions that have been eradicated or controlled in modern times. Or...she surmises, "perhaps we do

actually still have demons today, and we just find it more comfortable to use medical and scientific terms to describe the things that possess us.”

However, she admits, “I do know that like myself, many of my parishioners suffer from addictions, compulsions and depression. I do know that sometimes things get ahold of us, making us do things we don’t want to, or making us think we love things (substances, people, etc.) that are really destructive.” (3) She recalls that at one point in her life, her own depression felt so present, so much like a character in her life that it felt right to go ahead and give her a name, “Frances.” Frances first stopped by in her teens and early twenties and was written off by her family as being moody. Later, when she found herself liking the same things Frances liked – booze, unstable boyfriends, self-destruction – Frances finally just moved in, turning her studio apartment into a Wilderness. She was a terrible roommate. Kept the place filthy. Always told her devastating things about herself. So Nadia stopped showering. Had difficulty grocery shopping and was so distracted she’d forget to eat. Until Nadia’s aunt intervened and Nadia discovered that there was one drug Frances did not like. Wellbutrin.

To this day, Pastor Nadia has occasional bouts with Frances, leading her to say, “So given my history with Frances, maybe demons having their own names and saying things out loud to Jesus isn’t so foreign to me after all. It’s weird, but of all the characters in the Gospels who encounter Jesus, the ones who most reliably know who he is are not the religious authorities or even Jesus’s own disciples! They are the demons! The demons always recognize Jesus’s authority. And the demons are afraid. **Which is exactly why our demons try to keep us from the people who remind us how loved we are.** Our demons have nothing to do with the love of God in Christ Jesus because God’s love threatens to obliterate them, and so our demons try to isolate us, and tell us that we are not worthy to be called children of God. And those are lies that Jesus simply does not abide.” (4)

Later on in the chapter, Pastor Nadia tells us that in the Jesus business, community is always a part of healing. Even though the community is never perfect. Which is why a bunch of us gather by Zoom every Tuesday evening as a group, a community, in Spirits & Studies – to share, to learn, to have fun, to be reminded that we are loved. Small groups...Bible studies...book discussions ...neighborhood groups...groups working together to feed the hungry

and provide shelter for the homeless. In other words church is the community where we find healing of all sorts.

In an insightful article in the *Christian Century* dealing with today's Gospel lesson titled "Resistance and Healing," David Bartlett shares that today's "story has implications for personal healing. As friends, counselors, and pastors, we know that denial and resistance is strongest just at the point of healing. Or, rather, it is just at the point where denial is strongest that the opportunity for healing arises. Caught up by addictions, passions or compulsions that destroy us, we are closest to healing when we shout most loudly that we want nothing to do with those who can help. That is the difficult moment when, needing healing, we are called to resist our own resistance.

And if we can move behind the literal reading of exorcism to consider personal healing, we can also consider social healing. The forces that destroy can be external as well as internal. Powers that bolster the economic privilege of some, (that perpetuate the sins of racism, that slam the door on immigrants seeking legitimate entry into our country, homophobia, the hatred and fear of the Other that incites violence by white nationalists on the extreme right, and groups like Antifa on the extreme left)...these forces threaten the security of many. Maybe – just maybe – it is coincidental that the principalities and powers in Mark's story, the Pharisees and the Herodians, end up cheering for the demons and resisting Christ. Again, the very moment of resistance can be the moment of healing!" (5)

As we face our demons, both personally and nationally, the question Jesus poses to us today is simply this: Will we resist our demons and find healing? Or will we avoid, and deny, and continue down the path of destruction? The choice is ours. Amen.

Pastor Rich Darr

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- (1) Eliza Griswold, "The Lutheran Pastor Calling for a Sexual Revolution," *The New Yorker*, Feb.8, 2019.
- (2) nadiaweberbolz.com
- (3) Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, Crown Publishing Group 2015, chpt 9.
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) David Bartlett, "Healing and Resistance," *The Christian Century*, January 23, 1991, p. 74.