

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

Mark 3:20–21

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I have always found it easy to relate to the family of Jesus in this story. Many times now, I have been the brother who sees his sibling neglect his own wellbeing for the sake of a spiritual vision that seems strange, even troubling, to the rest of us. *Psychotic* is the word we tend to use. I have joined in the hushed conversations about how to take charge of the situation and rescue this man from himself. And year after year as these crises play out, I have heard my brother saying, "You don't understand, you're not really listening to me, you're missing the point."

Revisiting this story reminds me of the many ways that Christ aligns himself with the outsiders, the outcasts, the atypical, and the marginalized. Christ, in this passage, takes the position of the madman, rather than the concerned and compassionate family trying to take charge of him. And for me, this moment complicates and refines my understanding of Jesus' other lesson: "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

I have typically felt this passage from Matthew to be fairly self-explanatory: When we feed the hungry, and welcome the stranger, and care for the sick, and visit with the prisoner, we feed and welcome and care for and visit with Christ, who aligns himself with all those in need. And this all still seems right to me.

But what I often miss, and what's revealed to me by my own identification with the family of Jesus in the first story—that family so preemptively convinced of Jesus' need and of the rightness of their course of action—is that often our relationships with the "needy" in our lives are entirely built on our assumptions about what we must do for them or give to them. Perhaps we think too little about what we might gain if we relinquished some control and sat for a few moments at their feet. If I really am feeding and welcoming and caring for and visiting with Christ in these situations, then I am the one who is truly needy.

Last year, in the midst of what my family would typically call a *crisis* moment with my brother, I went to spend the afternoon with him. When I arrived, it was easy to see what had concerned my family. He was distracted, agitated, and unkempt; he smoked compulsively, smoked until his voice was a cardboard rattle; he spoke very little, and when he did, it was in obscure riddles. All the old, now-familiar symptoms. But I have

begun to suspect that if all I ever look for in my brother's human face are the signs of an illness—the marks of his otherness and his lack—I will only ever understand him as an object of need. And the more I see him as only his need, the less I allow him to fully exist, and for his existence, his wisdom and wit and love and creativity and raw God-imagined, Christ-carrying presence, to bless me.

That day we talked for three or four hours. When he spoke in riddles, I asked him if he could help me understand. And like Christ explaining his parables to the disciples, he obliged. We discussed the book of Zen writings he had lent me, and he told me the story of an ancient Buddhist teacher who, when the emperor asked him to speak about Zen, had responded by playing a single note on his flute. And I understood that he was telling me about the failure of language, and about the value of silence, and humor, and mystery. He told me to keep the book. He must have bought the same book ten or fifteen times, he said, and left it in the library of every psych ward he'd been committed to, as a kind of monastic service. We debated, as we always have, the nature of God and the human soul; but I could not be sure that I was right, and I could not write him off as merely out of his mind. I glimpsed that afternoon the deep spiritual wisdom he had been cultivating over the past fifteen years of meditation and contemplation.

I was not convinced that he would never need to be hospitalized again; I could not tell you how he planned to feed or care for himself, either in the short or long term. But I know that I have never felt more purely blessed than I did in the moment, just before I left, when my brother pressed his hands together in prayer, bowed his forehead into my chest, and rested his head for a moment against my heart.