

In Sickness and In Health

Friends, what a gift it is to be freely gathered for worship in this space and on the live stream on this crisp spring morning along the St. Croix River. We are, indeed, on land loved by First Nations and others before us and where we are building community – now and into the future.

Let's begin this time of reflection with a word of prayer. God, you call us to love one another – in sickness and in health. We pray this morning that your Spirit would guide each of us into moment of clarity. Help us to know what the next step needs to look like as we and our loved ones move along the path of mental health. We pray as followers of Jesus, the risen one. Let the people say together, Amen: Amen!

As a warmup for pausing, receiving, challenging and learning from our readings on this Mental Health Sunday, let's first receive, challenge, and learn from two commonly (possibly all too commonly) used phrases.

"God has a plan for you." Hhmmm. Humans make plans. To say that God has a plan for a person is to paint God as a humanoid dictator, dishing out joy-sparking experiences here and pain-inflicting experiences there. God (love) is present with us as our plans work out and as they don't work out. It is ok for us to feel frustrated, angry, sad, confused, and other ways about how our plans are working out or not working out.

"God won't give you more than you can handle." Hhmmm. To say that God calculates how many hardships to inflict on a person would be to say that we believe in a punishing God. In reality, we opt into much of what we experience. And some phenomena seem to land on our plate without our consciously choosing them.

We definitely feel overwhelmed (and as though we have more than we can handle) at times. God (love) does not control the contents of our proverbial plates. God is present with us in the midst of overwhelm.

God is with us in sickness and in health. And we all experience both. For some of us, sickness of body or mind is sporadic and for others of us, either sickness of body or mind might be chronic. God is with us through all of it. When quippy one-liners come our way (be they across our social media feed, from the lips of a loved one, or from the lips of one whom we find it very challenging to love), I encourage us to pause, receive, challenge, and learn.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is an exceptionally wonderful life-affirming organization. All of us (those of us living with mental illness, those of us who daily interact with persons living with mental illness, and those of us who could check both boxes) can find excellent resources on the NAMI website and in the many gatherings they host.

Part of NAMI's mission is stigma reduction. They were a key partner in the "Make it OK" campaign begun in 2012 – with a goal to make it ok to talk about mental health challenges. We still have a long way to go in terms of destigmatization in this land. Hear these pertinent words from Oprah Winfrey: *"We, as a culture, have not fully acknowledged how much help is needed. The only real shame is on us for not being willing to speak openly. For continuing to deny that mental health is related to our overall health. We need to start talking ,and we need to start now."*

Let's practice destigmatization right now. I invite you to close your eyes to listen for experiences that you have lived.

Have you: received a mental health diagnosis, loved someone who has a mental illness, known someone who has considered or ended their own life based in mental anguish, considered ending your own life, helped a loved one get connected with a therapist, participated in therapy for your own mental health. I invite you to open your eyes. And by generous option of choice – if any of these are true for you, I invite us to consider raising our hands now. Maybe look around. Mental health challenges affect us all.

Hear these current statistics from NAMI:

- *“1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year*
- *1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year”* (and we will look at that distinction)
- *1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year*
- *50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24”*

Having considered that God’s love might be more of a companion than a dictator or puppet master as our lives unfold – how God’s love might be very present with us even or especially when we and people we know live through times that feel like more than we can handle; let’s now turn to the story from First Samuel about King Saul. Hmmmm. We heard these two bits:

*“And Saul’s servants said to him, ‘See now, **an evil spirit from God is tormenting** you” and later in the passage – “And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would **be relieved and feel better**, and the evil spirit would depart from him.”*

Interestingly, someone in our congregation involved in raising young people asked me this week for a response about who or what the devil or sat is and what evil is. For some people, it may be helpful to think of a being or a particular spirit as dishing out evil. For me, evil is the power of fear harnessed to control or diminish. Evil is the opposite of love. Evil is not from God in the way that Jesus has shared faith with us. Our ancestors told many stories about their journey with God. That we may think differently than them does not invalidate the stories they left behind. We can continue our journey of discerning what the evil pressures in our society are and where the love of God shows up.

Another thing we can gather from this passage is a reminder and normalization of how feeling tormented is very real for those of us managing mental and emotional health challenges. And relief and feeling better ARE possible – especially in community, including the community David brought to Saul with his lyre.

Let's welcome the words inspired by Psalm 88 to open us to experience sacred discomfort right here in this moment and space – so that we can be ready to bravely experience sacred discomfort when we choose to bravely articulate or hear another's experience with mental and emotional anguish. Let a few of the words roll over you.

"For my soul is full of troubles, and my life seems like dust, I have fallen into a pit of despair; I have no strength and I feel powerless..." Have you felt that way or has someone in your life felt that way?

"...hopelessness threatens to overwhelm me. Through You alone can I pray for my enemies, for those who ignore my plight." Have you or someone you know felt that way?

“Will you raise me from this living death?

Will you mend a broken heart?...

Let not separation keep me from your Heart;

be my strength as I face the darkness inside.” Have you or someone else you know felt that deep longing?

I want to return to the different types of mental illness we can experience. This information about mental illness comes from the National Institute of Mental Health. In my research, I read this:

“Mental illnesses are common in the United States and around the world. It is estimated that more than one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness... Mental illnesses include many different conditions that vary in degree of severity, ranging from mild to moderate to severe. Two broad categories can be used to describe these conditions: Any Mental Illness and Serious Mental Illness.

Any mental illness is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder. AMI can vary in impact, ranging from no impairment to mild, moderate, and even severe impairment (e.g., individuals with serious mental illness as defined below).

Serious mental illness is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder resulting in serious functional impairment, which substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities. The burden of mental illnesses is particularly concentrated among those who experience disability due to serious mental illness.”

The people in our lives have such varying experiences and relationships with mental health.

One other curiosity I carried with me this week was to learn more about the intersection between mental health and illness and neurodiversity in the brain.

So, finally, I want to share with you from *Psychology Today* a bit from an article entitled **“Is There a Link Between Neurodiversity and Mental Health?”**: *“Neurodiversity, a term thought to have been coined by Australian sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s, represents the different ways in which people do anything from thinking, moving, and behaving to visualizing, communicating, and processing information. It is not a single condition. It includes everyone and encompasses a large number of people who may diverge from the mean. Neurodivergent traits are typically associated with both challenges and strengths... Any trait can be an advantage for some people if they have the opportunity to deploy it in a useful way—for example, being extremely creative or gifted with numbers. For some, however, having neurodivergent traits may create challenges, especially when navigating settings where there are social expectations. The differences can lead to, or be associated with, difficulties, including mental illnesses. There is extensive evidence of greater rates of depression and anxiety co-occurring with autism, dyspraxia, and ADHD.”*

So what can we do as people of faith? How can we be channels of God’s love? In our United Church of Christ, local churches are encouraged to consider becoming WISE. WISE is an acronym that stands for welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and engaged around issues of mental health. It is not a feather to put in a local church’s hat. It is, instead, a process to being and a focus to maintain in the forefront of a congregation’s life.

We are doing so many wonderful works of love and justice as a church. But if you have a passion for mental health and supporting it, please let me know because there is a process we could consider inviting our congregation into.

And why? Because Jesus calls us to embody God's love, to make it felt and experienced in human lives – in sickness and in health. May it be so. Amen.

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1 Samuel 16:14-23, A companion text to Psalm 88