

GOOD NEWS DURING LIFE'S CHALLENGES
Galatians 6:10, Ephesians 2:4-10

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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Why should the church care about addiction?

Because Jesus chose to spend his time with those others shunned, ignored, rejected...Jesus chose to spend his time with the people we try to pretend are not around...

Because in the gospel of John said, "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly...". We worship a God who wants more for us than just existence, far more than mere survival. We worship a God who wants us to thrive, to live fully, and addiction keeps us from the lives we were meant to live.

Because, as Tom has said, addiction is a disease. Does addiction involve some element of choice, decision-making, freewill? Yes. But those who live with addiction stand in need of God's grace, as we all do. Those who live with addiction are as deserving of God's unconditional love as any of us. Those who struggle with addictions of any kind long for communion with God and community with their fellow human beings. As we all do.

Here's a definition of addiction I have learned from recently: "Addiction exists whenever persons are internally compelled to give energy to things that are not their true desires."

If the true desire of every human being, at our core, is to be connected with God, and I believe it is, an addiction is the state that keeps us away from God. When we are chasing after the object of our addiction, we are running away from God.

Note that I'm saying the words "our" and "we", instead of "them" and "those people." I believe that we all live with addictions. An addiction to chocolate is not as dangerous as an addiction to alcohol, to be sure. An addiction to exercise is not the same as an addiction to gambling. But most of us have certain tendencies we find difficult to control, strong likes or dislikes that, in fact, seem to control us. These are addictions. They can take up so much space in our lives and in our minds that there is no more room for God. I love how one writer puts it: "God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them. If our hands are full, they are full of the things to which we are addicted. And not only our hands, but also our hearts, minds and attention are clogged with addiction. Our addictions fill up the spaces within us, spaces where grace might flow."

The point is not to feel guilty. To be human is to struggle with addictions. We all do. I was working on this sermon while we were traveling this past week. Travel is tiring, conferences are tiring, and I was craving more coffee than usual. The irony was not lost on me, that I was reading a book about addiction and writing a sermon about addiction while guzzling cup after cup of early morning hotel coffee.

It's not my only compulsion. And having a smart phone doesn't help, does it?

One of the reasons we care about addiction is that addiction is, at its core, a spiritual issue. One of its pernicious effects is that it makes us almost unable to still our minds, to listen for God, to pray, to meditate, or to be self-reflective. Whether we're addicted to video games, or obsessed with food, or whether we are workaholics, when the object of our desire is something other than God, we find it hard to be in God's presence for long. Our minds and hearts are restless.

Addictions of all kinds begin to permanently change the way our brains are wired. And when we are addicted to substances which also, in themselves, alter our brains, we are pulled further and further from God, and from our true selves. We stop being honest

with ourselves and instead engage in denial and lies. Today, especially, we're talking about addiction to heroin, the crisis which is stealing not just the minds but the very lives of so many. Some people become addicted the first time they use. Some die the first time they use. Some live, but you wouldn't call it abundant life by any stretch of the imagination. It's a life of looking for the next high, and the effects of the drug quickly make it impossible to function in any way as one did before.

The church cares because we are followers of Jesus, and Jesus loves those who are living with addiction. Jesus spent time with the downtrodden. Jesus loved the person living with leprosy, a disease feared and misunderstood. Do any of us doubt that Jesus would have sought out the girl with needle tracks on her arms?

Over the past year, we have been learning all we can about the opioid crisis so that we could then determine what we are called to do to help. We have visited sober living facilities, attended county-wide meetings, read the book Dreamland. We have already become involved helping to furnish a kitchen, serving meals, writing notes of encouragement. But there is one more step, and it is the number one request we have encountered. We have been asked, by people living with addiction, by those who care about them, those who work with them, their family members, their friends, and in some cases their survivors, to please help reduce the stigma around addiction.

The definition of stigma is "a mark of shame." Where there is stigma, there are whispers instead of offers of support and concern. When there is stigma, there are feelings of guilt and blame. Stigma keeps people from asking for and receiving the help they need. Here's how one person put it. He has been in recovery for 10 years: "There is a stigma attached to addiction which can be deadly. But it's not my stigma—I stopped carrying that shame and embarrassment around years ago, if I ever felt it at all. I experience this stigma when I share my identity with people who aren't addicts, who don't know

someone in recovery, or who hold onto the idea that people like me are somehow second class citizens. Less than 10% of people like me end up asking for treatment, or medical help of any kind, for their substance problems. Less than 10%. That's not because we don't want help. It's because, in this culture, merely admitting that you need help means wearing a scarlet A on your chest for the rest of your life. A is for Addict. A is for Alcoholic. People like me often barely survive this disease, only to be treated to a lifetime of unequal treatment, unkindness, prejudice, and discrimination."

Stigma keeps family members from receiving the help and comfort they need, too. People don't seek help because they don't want their friends and neighbors and relatives finding out. The words we use matter. Calling someone an "addict" labels that person, summarizes that entire person in a negative manner. "A person with an addiction" or "a person with a substance abuse disorder" reminds us all that, first and foremost, he or she is a person. This is not about being politically correct. It's about seeing someone, whether that is a person in need of treatment, or a family member in need of counseling, as a person worthy of dignity and respect. We know that this is how Jesus saw every single person. Changing our language matters. It will begin to make a difference in the way people are treated by the medical community, and the kinds of resources that are made available by government.

Remembering that we all live with addictions perhaps will help us be more empathetic with those whose addictions are life-threatening. Our church will continue to learn, continue to assess where we can be most useful, and continue to partner with those organizations that are on the front line, trying to bring about wholeness and healing to God's beloved children. It is good news worthy of our investment. It is changing lives, restoring hope, and without a doubt, it is work that Jesus would have us do.