

# LEARNING SELF-COMPASSION

Mark 1:9-12

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Why are we talking about mental illness in church?

For one thing, it affects about half of us. In a given year, one in every four people will be affected by substance abuse or a mental illness that is severe, moderate or mild. Over 26% of us will struggle with a mental illness this year, which means that our family members' and friends' lives are changed, too, as they seek to be supportive, to understand, and to adjust. On any given Sunday, then, about half of us sitting in this sanctuary are living with a mental illness or addiction issue or are close to someone who is. Mental illness and substance abuse are not the same, but they are linked in many ways.

Why else do we talk about mental illness in church? Because people living with mental illness often feel misunderstood. Mental illness has a stigma that most physical illnesses do not have. Jesus reached out to people who were marginalized, to those who were ostracized, and to those who were the outcasts in the eyes of society. As followers of Jesus, we are called to acknowledge and affirm the worth of everyone, especially those who often feel they are less than, not enough, not deserving of respect.

We talk about mental illness in church so that those who are living with mental illness and those who love them will be reminded of God's unconditional love.

When my friend and colleague Martie was 16, she was home one summer afternoon, sitting at the piano bench, when her dad burst in the room. It frightened her, because her parents had left town the day before on a short trip. She slid off the piano

bench to say hello to her dad when he burst into tears. She'd never seen him cry in 16 years. Between sobs, trying to catch his breath, he told Martie that her mother was ill and that he'd taken her to the hospital. "Your mother had a nervous breakdown." In reality, Martie's mother had a psychotic episode, a complete break with reality, with hallucinations and aggressive behavior. "Nervous breakdown" was the euphemism used in those days. Martie's father had taken her mother to a psychiatric hospital.

They discovered as the weeks went on that she had suffered from a rapid decrease in estrogen that had upset the chemistry in her brain and had created a serious malfunction. She remained in the hospital for six weeks, and underwent electric shock treatments which re-set her brain functioning. Her estrogen was restored to the normal level and she never had another episode. Once she came home, she was as high functioning as always. When she got out of the hospital, she returned to her business as a hairdresser. But, some of her regular customers whom she'd seen every week for 25 years stopped coming to her to do their hair. All because she'd spent six weeks in a psychiatric hospital. She was the same person that her customers had known for 25 years. The same person whom they respected and counted on to be there for them week after week, doing their hair just as she always had. She was no less competent than she had ever been. But now they saw her differently. She had been stigmatized by a mental health issue.

If she had been in the hospital with a malfunctioning pancreas causing out of control diabetes, or a malfunctioning heart causing a heart attack, would they have refused to let her do their hair? Probably not. But she had a malfunctioning brain, and people react to that differently. That's an example of stigma.

Here is something that has happened to me, dozens of times in my career. A parishioner will tell me something in the privacy of my office. Something about which he or she feels ashamed or embarrassed. A story of an addiction, an abortion, an affair, a child out of wedlock, a bankruptcy. And that person will say to me, "I wouldn't want anyone to know about this; I already feel self-conscious coming to church." We look around here in church and we tend to imagine that everyone else's life is perfect. After all, we put on our best faces at church. The truth is, no one's life is perfect. Everyone experiences brokenness and pain of some kind.

When Jesus is baptized, as the story is told in Matthew, Mark and Luke, there is a voice heard from the heavens which says, "This is my beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased." It is a way for the gospel story to identify Jesus as God's chosen one. But it is more than that. When God speaks words of affirmation, acceptance and unconditional love to Jesus, God is speaking those words to all of humanity. We are all created in God's image. The psalmist says that we are wonderfully made. Many theologians and psychologists alike believe that the most basic step towards both spiritual and psychological help is for us to accept God's acceptance of us. For each of us to hear God calling us by name and saying to us, "You are my beloved child; in you I am well-pleased."

God accepts you just as you are. With your imperfections, regardless of your mistakes. As the church, we want to embody that accepting spirit. We want to be a place where people feel the accepting love of God.

If you are a person who has been affected by mental illness in any way, or if you just want to learn more, a resource I highly recommend is NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. It is the largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to

improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness. NAMI teaches us that “Mental illnesses are medical conditions that disrupt a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning. Mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life.” The good news about mental illness is that recovery is possible; help is available.

I have two younger brothers. My brother Ed lives in Cleveland. My brother David lives in Columbus, and he is a person living with mental illness. After he was diagnosed about fifteen years ago, he was hospitalized several times and was suicidal several times. My brother Ed and I wanted to learn more about what David was going through so we would know how to be supportive siblings. We attended a twelve-week program called Family-to-Family, sponsored by NAMI. It was enormously helpful. As someone who has never experienced mental illness myself, it was difficult for me to empathize with my brother until I learned more. When he was first diagnosed and I observed his behavior, I found myself thinking, “He needs more exercise; that would really help him.” Or: “He’d feel a lot better if he’d improve his diet.” I was thinking about the lifestyle changes that benefit me. What I learned in the NAMI Family to Family class is that some days, when you live with a mental illness, it takes every ounce of your energy just to get out of bed in the morning. One person who has lived with severe depression put it this way. “Imagine the worst day of flu you’ve ever had. A flu so bad that you can barely move. That’s how it feels to be severely depressed. No one says to you, when you have a bad flu, ‘just take a brisk walk.’” The Family to Family class, along with some reading, made me much more empathetic. (I want to thank you for praying for my brother over the years. We celebrated his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday yesterday and I’m happy to report he is doing well right now.)

This past week, mental illness was in the news, again, along with a story about horrific gun violence, again. The responses to mass shootings have become as predictable as the events themselves. Every time, we seem to hear these same responses:

--the problem is the NRA, and the power it wields in Congress;

--the answer is "more guns" so that "the good guys will be armed and fight back"

--the problem is lack of funding for mental illness treatment;

--"thoughts and prayers"

--outrage "when is enough enough?"

We all resort to our favorite response, and then life goes on. Nothing changes. The rhetoric of blame isn't helping. Retreating to our corners isn't doing any good. There IS a middle ground here. The vast majority of citizens does not want our schools to become killing fields. On that we can agree. What if we came together and started talking about some strategies, on a local level?

Last week I preached about the power of imagination and ideas and big, bold dreams. One parishioner thanked me for my sermon and also said, "But it's really hard to think about big, bold dreams." Well, here's one. Let's dream of curtailing incidents of mass violence. Our nation is becoming known around the world as a frightening, violent place. Three years ago at this time, I was recruiting church members to go with me on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Several people said to me, "It's just too frightening to think of traveling in a place like Israel." I understand that, and I respect that. What is sad is that is the way people from other countries are beginning to think about our country.

We are better than this. We can do better, for people living with mental illness. We can do better, for our children. Is it any wonder we have to have a class on teenage anxiety and depression? Can you imagine the post-traumatic stress disorder the students from Florida will have?

Our journey towards becoming more compassionate people starts with accepting ourselves, just as we are, acknowledging that we are not perfect, that all life involves challenge and struggle. Our characters are formed by the way we react to the difficult trials of our lives.

Nothing is more healing than love. When we tap into the forces of love and compassion, we are tapping into the very heart of God. Your bulletin insert today gives you some information and five simple things you can do to make the world a better place for people with mental illnesses and their families. Cards in our pews remind you that our Stephen Ministers are here, not as professional counselors or to take the place of psychiatric care, but to walk with people who are affected by mental illnesses, especially family members. We are considering a support group – please let me know if you would find that beneficial. Finally, you will be given a green pin as you leave worship today, to indicate that you are an ally to those affected by mental illness. It is one step towards becoming a more compassionate person, a more compassionate church.

You, you, are God's beloved child. In you, God is well-pleased. Believe it, for it is the truth.