

## FINDING AND ACCEPTING HELP

I Samuel 16:14-23

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When we began putting today's worship service together, Beau made a comment to the effect of, "Hmm, I'm not really familiar with this scripture passage." And I replied, "That makes two of us." This passage from I Samuel does not appear in the lectionary collection of readings. I came across it when I began thinking about today's focus on mental health. The United Church of Christ Mental Health Network encourages churches to bring into the light this issue which affects approximately 20% of all Americans. Among their resources are some suggested scripture readings, including this one.

There are two reasons why this passage is useful to us today, but first, let me set a context. Saul is the first king of Israel, anointed by the prophet Samuel. It's a time of war and bloodshed. Saul is a military leader, and his reign is problematic. David will become the next king. Our passage for today is the first mention of David in the Bible. Our narrative gives us this interpretation: "Now the Lord's Spirit had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him."

I have trouble even reading those words out loud, because they are so far from our understanding of illness, of mental illness, and of the nature

of God. I have trouble reading these words out loud because these misconceptions cause so much pain and hurt, even now. Throughout the Bible, and for centuries afterwards, this was the widely-held belief: If you had a illness or a disability of any kind, it was the result of sin - either your sin or the sins of your parents. Our ancestors had no other way to make sense of illness. So if you were blind, or if you lived with schizophrenia, or depression, you were doubly cursed. First you had to cope with that particular physical situation, then you had to cope with being socially ostracized. Because people saw illness to be a result of sin, people with illnesses were often shunned. They were considered unclean.

We now have the benefit of science and research; we understand that illnesses are caused by genetics or by environmental factors, or that they simply occur for no reason at all. We understand that mental illness IS an illness, that it has to do with the chemistry of the brain. But let's not be too quick to pat ourselves on the back and compliment ourselves for how advanced we are...we know that people with differing abilities are often treated as "less-than" in our society. We know that stigma exists for many people with mental illness. And sometimes people with physical illnesses are asked, "How did you get that? Do you know?" — questions that may be curious but actually can bring a sense of blame and shame. People

diagnosed with cancer often look back at every decision they made, everything they ate, trying to figure out, “Why me?”

Because Saul is the king, he is not ostracized. He seems to live with some sort of recurring depression. It’s not constant and it’s not debilitating, but it was a condition familiar to those around him. They blame God for it. Verse 15 of our passage reads, “Saul’s servants said to him, ‘Look, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you.’”

So the first reason this passage is useful to us is that it reminds us that there are deep-seated reactions to people with illness, especially people with mental illness. The more we are aware of those reactions in ourselves, the better we can guard against them, and treat people — including ourselves — with dignity, respect and care.

What Saul’s servants do next is interesting! They have figured out that music helps Saul’s depression. They send for someone who can play the harp - and David enters the scene and the story. Our passage continues, “Saul liked David very much...whenever the evil spirit from God affected Saul, David would take the lyre (small harp) and play it. Then Saul would relax and feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him alone.”

Between the servants and Saul himself, they learn what helps Saul when he is depressed. They take action, and Saul is willing to receive help.

We planned for today's focus on mental illness many months ago - I actually think it was last fall. It's not the first time we've addressed the issue of mental health in worship. We want everyone who is a part of our community to know that we are committed to doing everything we can to end the stigma and shame that often accompany the diagnosis of mental illness. We want to encourage people to receive the treatment and support that will help them live fully, as God intends.

We are happy to direct people to the resources of groups like NAMI, whom you heard from earlier, and we are happy to offer our own mental health support group twice a month - currently meeting online. To be connected to that group, please contact, me, our parish nurse Cheryl Updegraff, or the church office. This group is for people who have family or friends living with mental illness.

This time of coronavirus is especially difficult for those already living with mental illness, and many people who never before experienced many feelings of anxiety or depression have found it more difficult to maintain their mental and emotional health. I want to remind all of you that we have a vital Stephen Ministry program in this church. In fact, the first event we had to cancel in March was the commissioning of five new Stephen Ministers. We have men and women standing by, ready to assist. Stephen Ministers are trained confidential listeners, and they will meet with you over

the phone or in another safe capacity. If you need to vent, if you need a shoulder to cry on, please don't hesitate to reach out. King Saul didn't have to solve his problems alone — and neither do the rest of us. Please contact me or Beau or any of our Stephen Ministers, and I want to say one more thing before moving on — if you ever feel that you are suicidal, call the suicide helpline:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

Saul discovered, perhaps through trial and error, that music was helpful to him. Whether you are living with a mental health diagnosis, or just finding yourself feeling blue or blah from time to time, experimenting with what makes you feel better is a great idea. Music, picking up the phone and calling a friend, walking in a beautiful park, doing something for someone else — find what works for you and take action.

And please remember that we all need to both give and receive help; it's part of being fully human.

I reached out earlier this week to Dr. Meghan Barlow to ask if she would give some specific advice to parents. Dr. Barlow is an Avon Lake resident and a friend of this congregation. She has a Ph.D in clinical psychology and specializes in children and adolescents. I asked her three questions and she was gracious enough to answer them on video from her cabin in northern Michigan where she has gone to be with her family for a

couple of days.

My first question: “What is your best advice for parents as we go into an uncertain summer?”

I then asked her, “Is there a common mistake that you’re seeing in parents right now, perhaps something relatively easy to adjust?”

And finally, “How can parents be more empathetic with what their children are experiencing?”

I don’t know anyone who isn’t finding these days to be challenging. We will best survive them in a healthy way if we admit what it is we find difficult. For some of us, it’s the isolation that’s hard, for others it’s the fact that their family is experiencing TOO much togetherness. For some it’s the disappointment at what’s been cancelled, for others it’s the uncertainty about the future and worries about finances. COVID has interrupted our sleep patterns; we find it hard to focus and concentrate.

Unlike other life crises, we’re all in this one together and we can help one another through it. Asking for help is a sign of strength and wisdom. Please contact the church if you need referrals to a counselor, if you would

like to talk to a Stephen Minister, if you would like to connect to our mental health support group, or if you would like to meet with me or Beau.

Experiment with finding the healthy everyday coping mechanisms that make you feel better. Remember that God did not bring this disease - God does not cause bad things to happen to us ever. But God will help us through it. Let us pray.

God, whose will for each of us is a life of wholeness and wellness, we pray for those who are living with mental illness, and those who care for them. We pray for one another in these days as most of us are experiencing some feelings of anxiousness and depression from time to time. Remind us to turn to you, to find comfort in your stillness, to draw upon your strength. Give us the wisdom to ask for help when we need it, and to find the blessed rhythm of giving and receiving. We pray in the name of Jesus who saw the dignity in each person. Amen.