

## SPEAKING OUR PAIN

Psalm 88

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(online worship only)

Do you know anyone who is 100% healthy all the time? No broken bones, no colds, no allergies? Some people are blessed with good health - which is usually a combination of luck, genes, and lifestyle choices. But no one is 100% healthy all of the time. When we think about our health, what we really do is think about a spectrum. We might say, "I'm a generally healthy person" or "I have a relative who seems to always be sick, one thing after another."

Why is it we don't think of mental health in the same way? Until very recently, the language around mental health sounded something like this. "Do you know someone who struggles with mental health issues?"

You would never hear someone say, "Do you know someone who struggles with health issues?" We just take it for granted that we'll all be sick at some point in our lives. We all struggle with some health issue from time to time.

We have separated mental health and treated it as a separate category altogether, thinking of some people as mentally healthy and some people as mentally ill. The word "stigma" comes into our vocabulary at this point. Because we treated some people as "others", separate from the majority, we stigmatized them, made them outcasts. They felt **different**, as if there were something wrong with them.

We are starting to come to a better, more helpful understanding of mental health. We are beginning to understand that mental health is a spectrum, too, just like physical health. Some people are blessed with good mental health - which is usually a combination

of luck, genes, and lifestyle choices. But no one is 100% mentally healthy all of the time. Now celebrities like Kevin Love talk about their mental health. People write memoirs about their struggles with anxiety and depression. Stories that used to be kept secret are being told in the public arena. People are feeling less ashamed. And all that is very good. We are starting to realize that **everyone** is mentally ill from time to time. Can you honestly say that you haven't battled feelings of depression or anxiety or compulsive thoughts or behavior? I have never said it out loud before, but I'll say it now. I've been depressed. I've been anxious. Therefore, I have experienced mental illness. There are people in my life who are more ill than I am. I have relatives, loved ones, who are on medication, who have been hospitalized, who have received electroshock therapy. They are on a different end of the spectrum, but no longer do I think of **them** as mentally ill and **me** as mentally well. **No one** is 100% mentally healthy all of the time.

Living through a pandemic has helped to normalize the experience of mental health. People who never before would talk about being depressed feel more comfortable sharing their stories. I don't know anyone who has not found it mentally and emotionally challenging to maintain a sense of equilibrium over the last year and a half. Every parent I'm familiar with has worried about their children. How will they learn during online school? Will they fall behind? How hard will it be on them to miss so many milestones - graduations, proms, sporting events? And parents who worry about their children often experience their own anxiety and depression.

Statistics are that in a given year, 26.2% of all people will be affected by substance abuse or a mental illness that is severe, moderate or mild. My anecdotal evidence tells me this year the number is far closer to 100%.

I want to stop here and let you know about what help the church can offer. We have a mental health support group that meets the first Tuesday of each month at 7 PM. The group is led by Mike Carr, a church member and professional counselor, Stephen Ministry leader Teri Ann Jasany, and parish nurse Cheryl Updegraff. New members are always welcome. Non-church members are always welcome. This support group is for those who have relatives or close friends who live with serious mental illness. For more information, please contact Mike, Teri Ann or Cheryl.

If you are experiencing anxiety, depression, compulsive thoughts or behavior that is affecting your ability to function, we encourage you to first contact your primary care physician, and seek referrals for talk therapy as well as other help. A Stephen Minister can be a useful spiritual support, too. Please contact me to learn more about Stephen Ministry.

I highly recommend the resources provided by an organization called NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. They offer support groups, as well.

I want to mention one more upcoming opportunity that might provide some healing and wholeness. As I have been thinking about all that we have gone through these past 15 months, I realized that all of us have endured grief and loss. Some of us have lost relatives to COVID, but all of us have lost something - vacations, hugs, time with loved ones, singing, the list goes on and on. We are planning a memorial service for the end of the summer. We will gather in the back parking lot for an evening of prayer, candlelight, a walk through the Memorial Garden, a time to commemorate all of our losses before the fall program season and school year begin.

We know that physical health and mental health are connected, just as our bodies and minds are connected. Our spiritual health is also a part of the whole.

Psalm 88 is a psalm which describes, in unmistakable excruciating detail, what it's like to feel spiritually bereft. Psalm 88 is a **lament**; it is the writer's deeply open and honest complaint before God. The psalmist complains about his life and about what feels to him like the absence of God. Psalm 88 expresses anger and pain. It doesn't hold back or sugarcoat.

When I first began learning about how debilitating mental illness can be for some people, I read a memoir about depression. That book, more than any other, helped me begin to empathize with people whose pain is as acute as any physical pain could ever be. Several years later, my oldest brother and I took a 12-week class together, sponsored by NAMI, called Family to Family. We wanted to better understand what life is like for our youngest brother who has several mental illness diagnoses. I'll never forget the night that a person living with mental illness told us what many of his days are like. He said to our group, "Have you ever had the flu?" We all nodded yes. "Now think of what you feel like the day your flu is the worst - you'd never even attempt to get out of bed, to go to work, to function normally. Now imagine that you felt like that many days out of each month."

Some mental illnesses, just like some other illnesses, are hard to treat. Some people live with chronic illnesses and for them, every day can be a real struggle. Sometimes a medication works for a while, and then its effectiveness changes. If you've never been laid low by a bout of depression, if you've never been terrified by a panic attack, it's hard to be empathetic. For me, reading and learning really helped.

People who live with severe mental illness, mental illness that defies successful treatment, often feel shunned, misunderstood, and abandoned - even abandoned by God.

Not every mental illness or brain disorder has an easy cure; most, in fact, do not. But what we all **CAN** do to help is to try our best to ensure that people who live with mental

illness know that the church is a safe place, a place where they are welcome, a place where they can heal from experiences of shame and stigma. Think of a child with low-grade depression, a teenager with suicidal thoughts, or an eating disorder, an adult with agoraphobia or dementia. Those people are all people we know, members of our church family, brothers and sisters in Christ. How will we show them unconditional love and support?

One of the writers who has helped me the most in the last few years is Richard Rohr. Like several of you, I subscribe to his daily devotional and read it every morning. His book, [The Universal Christ](#), has been an important part of my recent spiritual journey. Richard Rohr often writes about the therapeutic power of looking at the painful parts of our lives. He puts it this way: “If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.”

To put it simply, Rohr says that pain is part of the human experience - we all carry some wounds, some memories of trauma. If we don't acknowledge those parts of ourselves, if we instead try to bury them and ignore them, we will just be passing pain along to others. But if we seek healing, then we find that our pain can be used as sources of healing for ourselves and others.

We don't need to pretend that life is perfect. Psalm 88 isn't the only psalm of lament in the Bible - there are many! The book of Job is one long lament - one long complaint to God about how unfairly Job had been treated. The Bible itself gives us examples of people who speak their pain. Not to gain sympathy, not to feel sorry for themselves, but because speaking it is the first step towards healing. One step towards better mental health is finding someone you can talk to, a trusted professional. One step towards better spiritual health is expressing yourself honestly to God.

One reason for this sermon today is because we want the church to be a place where people can find wholeness. Church isn't a substitute for professional mental health therapy, but it isn't a place where we have to hide our true selves, either. A healthy church is a place where people can help one another transform their pain. A place where we know that none of us is perfect, none of us has perfect health all the time. Here we accept one another, and provide opportunities for sharing our stories, even when those stories are sometimes sad and painful.

The Christian story involves the cross: a symbol of suffering, agony, shame, torture, pain. The cross reminds us that life always involves pain, and that God is with us through it all, whether we are aware of God's presence or not. This butterfly cross reminds us that even the cross can be transformed, from a symbol of pain into a symbol of hope. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Jesus our friend, be a friend to all who are hurting, to all who long to be close to you, and to all who long for someone to love and listen to them. Help each of us to be courageous and vulnerable, to share our stories, and to listen and accept one another. Amen.