

THE LONGING FOR RELIEF

I Kings 19:1-16

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
15 May 2022

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and it's easy to see that it's appropriate for schools, colleges, medical facilities and workplaces to all offer information on mental health - how people can access care, how to understand a loved one or coworker who's living with mental illness, how to evaluate your symptoms and know when you need help.

The United Church of Christ has designated today as Mental Health Sunday.

Let's begin with this question - what exactly does a topic like mental health have to do with the church, with worship, with the faith we proclaim?

One of my favorite verses of the Bible is in the gospel of John. Jesus says, "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly." It is God's will that all people experience abundance. Life is not just a matter of survival. Life is about finding joy, meaning and purpose - as one of our worship band songs says, "We are meant to thrive." When we are struggling with untreated mental illness, we are not living into the abundance for which we are meant.

Remember when Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment? He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength - and love your neighbor as you love yourself." Heart, soul, mind and strength - we are

called to love holistically, with all that we are - physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically. The healthier we are, the better we can love and serve - the more we have to give.

Throughout the Bible, God's people and God's laws speak up for and protect the most vulnerable, the outcast, the misunderstood. Jesus reached out to heal everyone he could - out of great compassion and a desire that all people be restored to their communities.

The most fundamental values of our faith call us to work for healing, wellness and wholeness for all of God's people.

This congregation's mission statement is "Growing People to Serve God and Others." That personal growth includes every aspect of our lives, from our relationships to our ongoing faith formation, and so this church's ministry and mission is focused on helping us find the connections between the challenges and opportunities of our daily lives and our Christian values.

For all of these reasons, we pay attention to the topic of mental health.

And we have never needed this discussion more than we do right now.

But before I share a few statistics, let me tell you what this topic means to me.

Like many people in my generation, "mental health" was not talked about when I was growing up. If we heard of someone who had a mental illness, we thought of that person as a rare minority, someone "other." When I entered ministry and began to meet more people who were living with mental illness, I knew I needed to understand it better. The first book that helped me was this one, Darkness Visible, by William Styron. Styron

was a Pulitzer Prize winning author, so his books are well-written. This is a short memoir in which he details his own experience of living with depression. He talks about his day-to-day life, what it feels like to live with such pain that he cannot make himself get out of bed. He and his wife had invited another couple over for dinner, and it was too late to cancel, but he could not bear to join them, so he stayed in his bedroom listening to their forks clink and their dinnertime chatter. All alone. Here's one of his quotes. "Depression is 'a wimp' of a word. Don't use the same term that you use for an economic decline or a rut in the ground for what can be a dreadful and raging disease." If you are trying to develop more empathy for the people in your life who live with depression, I highly recommend this book to you.

Several years later, one of my close relatives was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. My brother Eddie and I signed up for a nine-week class sponsored by NAMI, the National Alliance for Mental Illness. We wanted to learn more about how to understand and support our relative. Every week for nine weeks we drove to a church in Middleburg Heights for the class. One night the speaker said, "I'm here to tell you what my mental illness is often like. Think of how you feel when you have the flu, the kind of flu that knocks you out, where you have to drag yourself out of bed, just to the bathroom and back. You'd never think of going to work or school on those days. You don't expect yourself to do anything. But I feel that way many days, and I push myself to function anyway. I want you to understand that's what it's like for some of us. We are doing the best we can. So don't tell us we'll just feel better if we'd take a walk or eat better or listen to cheery music."

As I have continued to learn and read and understand more, I've come to think of mental health as a spectrum. Just as with our physical health, some people are "healthier" than others - and all people have good days and bad days. We don't label some people "sick" or some people "mentally ill." In fact, somewhere between 50 and 80% of all people will struggle with an episode of mental illness in our lifetimes, and **everyone of us** knows someone whose struggles are severe. So there is no "other." Mental illness is an issue that affects **all** of us.

The first message I want to convey in this sermon is this: you are not alone. If you are a person living with a mental health diagnosis, you are not alone. If your child or spouse or parent or best friend is living with a mental health diagnosis, you are not alone.

I have preached on this topic before, but it feels more urgent and important this year. Based on the articles I'm reading, the people coming to me for counseling, the messages I receive every week, more of us are experiencing anxiety and depression.

Just as I was writing this sermon, I received this text. "Kelly, thank you so much for preaching on mental health this week. The daughter of my wife's colleague died by suicide on Mother's Day. She was 28." The crisis is real.

In January of 2020, the largest main-line Protestant church in the country, the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, polled hundreds of their youth and young adult members, asking members of Gen Z and the Millennial Generation to identify their biggest worry, the number one issue they're concerned about. Far

and away, their answers were “stress, anxiety and mental health.” Remember that was two months BEFORE the pandemic began.

In December of 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General warned of a “devastating” mental health crisis among America’s youth. Depression, self-harm and suicide are all rising among American adolescents.

Just a few more facts. In 2019, 13 percent of adolescents reported having a major depressive episode - that was a 60 percent increase from 2007. In 2020, the number was 17%. (Stats aren’t available from 2021 yet, but almost certainly it will be higher.) Almost half of all high school students have reported experiencing mental health challenges during the coronavirus outbreak. The problem is worse for LGBT youth and for young women. Numerous hospital and doctor groups have called it a national emergency. Here’s a quote from a psychologist: (We have made progress in some areas.). “Young people are more educated; less likely to get pregnant, use drugs; less likely to die of accident or injury. By many markers, kids are doing fantastic and thriving. But there are these really important trends in anxiety, depression and suicide that stop us in our tracks. We need to figure it out,” she said, “because it’s life or death for these kids.”

The crisis is often attributed to the rise of social media. Some adolescents are more vulnerable than others to the effects of screen time. Teenagers as a group are getting less exercise, less sleep, and spending less time with people face to face.

For the last two years, I have received a year-end donation from a family in the church concerned about mental health. I have used this donation to help members of

the church obtain counseling. And we have just signed an agreement to show four films this fall about mental health and adolescence. The topics are social media, bullying, racism, and anxiety. The films are very expensive but very well-made and I'm using the resources from this family to help with the costs. I'm hopeful that we will have an excellent turnout. I know everyone who sees the films will find them informative and good conversation-starters. I want to put this on your radar now so that you can help spread the word this fall.

Counselors and psychologists are seeing people of all ages who feel traumatized by the ongoing pandemic, by the political divisions in our country, and describe a sense of grief, loss, and fatigue. At the same time, the counselors themselves are overwhelmed and many people have to wait too long to see a mental health professional.

But there is good news. People who seek help can find relief. A good friend of mine has struggled with anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts for years. She frightened herself and those of us around her. She sought treatment. She goes to counseling every week, she has been patient as her doctor has continued to change and tweak her medications, and gradually she has started to feel better, to feel hopeful about her future. Interestingly, at the same time that she has been working hard to become healthy, she has also made some new friends. And having more supportive relationships in her life has, I firmly believe, been a part of her recovery.

Research has shown that connecting to other people, in real life, is one of the best habits we can adopt for our overall well-being.

Generally speaking, women seem to be naturally better at this than men. The group most at risk for suicide and most likely to feel isolated is men, middle-aged and older. Men, let me encourage you to take advantage of the new opportunities here at church for men to connect with each other. At the Welcome Center you can see a sign-up for the fall men's retreat, and look for news of other events coming soon. Thanks to those volunteers who are starting men's ministry initiatives, especially Pete Barth and Bill Cowles.

The Bible contains many stories of people experiencing serious challenges. From the story of Job to the lament psalms, God's people find themselves in despair, wondering where God is and what God is doing to help them. The story Beau read for us about Elijah shows the prophet both terrified and despondent, longing for his own death. Just when he's given up, God comes to him, refreshes him with food and drink, and speaks to him in a still, small voice. Finally, God gives him a vision of his future, and Elijah's spirits are renewed.

Our faith does not make us immune from life's difficulties, and most people find that their faith journey is one of ups and downs, peaks and valleys, but the big picture is that people who practice their faith regularly are more resilient. People with relationships in a faith community report that they feel more encouraged.

I want to leave you today with these messages.

You are not alone. Help is available, and hope is real. Let the resources of your faith and your faith community be a part of your healing. Let's talk about what we can do to support and encourage one another. Our staff is here to help. We have a mental

health support group, Stephen Ministers, and information about other community resources. Please reach out to us.

We worship a God who loves us unconditionally, who created us in God's very own image, who loves us just as we are. We don't have to perform to earn God's love, we don't have to be perfect, we don't have to produce anything. We are already good enough in God's eyes. God isn't looking at our social media feeds or our bank accounts or our report cards or our sales quotas. God already loves us completely. The more we accept and believe that good news, and share it with others, the healthier we will be.

Amen.