

Shiloh United Methodist Church

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May 13, 2018

Broken: Suicide and Mental Illness

Worship Intro:

Today is mother's day. As a pastor I want to say to all the women in our congregation today, "Thank you for helping to mother this world in whatever way you will or have." Mothering is the reminder to us that the world needs love and connection beyond our division. Whether you are a biological mom, an adoptive mom, or a mom by other means you make a difference.

Our Broken series continues with mental health and suicide. As I have shared with members of our church, this series has been a God reminder to me of how we never know what God's work in our hearts will share with the world. When I planned this series I knew mother's day was in the middle of it, but I didn't know we would be addressing this hard topic on Mother's day. Then I had the opportunity to talk to a mother of a young man who I supported who had lost a son to suicide and remembered how important these tough topics have been to mothers in this world. Sustaining life through life's broken challenges is so hard, mothers somehow have found incredible ways to do this for all of humanity.

Today as we begin worship, I want to ask you to seek your heart the ways in which we have been offered life by the mothering presences in our lives.

Sermon:

In the Fall of 2012 I became good at something I never desired to be good at. I practiced ministry by offering memorial services for two families facing teenage suicide and honor the memory of their loved ones. Thankful for the insight of my ministry mentor who had offered these services before, I found myself swept up into serving families who were struggling with something that many people do not even know how to talk about.

Mental illness is something that generates stigma. Stigma is that reality when people learn of your mental illness or a loved one's, they treat you differently. People who have mental illness can be ostracized by friends, family doesn't know how to support them, and many times they find themselves cast aside by the world.

Something striking is that we do not cast people aside who have other long term illness. We do not shrug off people with thyroid disorders, or cast aside people with cancer. Yet mental illness impacts many of our neighbors and many of our neighbors face rejection because of it. Mental illness can be hard to understand, it can be hard to diagnose, and it can be even more difficult to treat. Yet, we know that there is hope for all people and we can be part of helping people find that hope.

Depression which is one of the most treatable forms of mental illness is included in this list of stigmatized diseases, and the truth is it will reach epidemic proportions soon. The World Health Organization predicts by 2030 depression will be the biggest world health issue among humans on our planet.¹ With this and other mental illness impacting so many of our neighbors, what will our call be in the near future to help educate, support, and surround our neighbors with care and support?

¹ <http://www.northernbroadcasting.com/voices-of-montana/montana-ranks-number-one-in-the-nation-on-suicide-rates/>

Our scriptures today come from James, the book full of wisdom we have been studying on how Christians should live. In it is some strong language about it is not our place to judge. The other scripture come from Lamentations, our book that describes a people who feel the world has been taken from them and where in the scriptures we can wonder if God is even with us. This scripture is the sentiment I have felt from some of the parents I have worked with and a message I have heard from people struggling with mental illness.

James 4:11-12 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

Lamentations 1:15-16 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁵ The Lord has rejected
 all my warriors in the midst of me;
he proclaimed a time against me
 to crush my young men;
the Lord has trodden as in a wine press
 the virgin daughter Judah.
¹⁶ For these things I weep;
 my eyes flow with tears;
for a comforter is far from me,
 one to revive my courage;
my children are desolate,
 for the enemy has prevailed

Suicide was our 8th highest killer in Montana last year, 272 people took their lives this way, which means we lost someone every 32 hours to

suicide in Montana. If you ask it won't take long for you to find someone impacted by this tragedy. I want to invite us to listen now to Kyra Munson, one of our own youth, share her story about a brush with a friend who was lost to suicide.

Kyra's story

When working in fast food, you meet many different kinds of people. I can remember on several occasions having cheerful banter with my coworkers. One of the summers that I was working at McDonald's we hired a new store maintenance worker. There people usually work early mornings in the store alone until about 8am. During that time, I started my shifts around 6am, so I had the opportunity to talk with our new maintenance worker, Martin. Over the summer I had gotten to know about Martin's life before he started working at McDonald's. He told me about his life in South Dakota with his daughter, who is now an adult still living in the state. Martin was a little bit older than my parents, so it was fairly easy having discussions with him.

Since he had only worked in maintenance, he didn't know how to do anything else at the store, like make one of those fancy coffee drinks. So one day, when Martin and I were talking, he had mentioned something about needing caffeine, and also had told me about how he didn't like black coffee (I'm the same way) so I had offered to make him a drink. When he did accept my offer, I started the concoction that would hopefully suit his taste. I remember asking him what flavors he liked, and he told me vanilla, so I made him a vanilla iced coffee, and he really enjoyed the drink! Every once in a while, I would make Martin his drink, a vanilla iced coffee.

The school year eventually started, and I didn't see Martin as much unless I came in the store early in the day. For a couple of weeks, I had noticed that there was a new

maintenance worker. One morning, I asked one of my coworkers where Martin had gone. She told me that Martin had committed suicide.

After hearing this, I was confused. It was as if I hadn't heard my coworker right. So I asked her when it had happened, and she told me a few weeks ago. This came as a shock to me. Nothing about his passing had been posted in the break room, and I never heard about it from my managers. When asking my general manager about it, she told me that she didn't know whether his family would want to disclose his way of passing.

In subtle ways the general manager in Kyra's story was trying to respect the family, and also played into the stigma of mental illness and suicide. When we don't talk about it, and are not open about it, then it gives the perception that mental illness that brings us to a deep place of despair, is something to be hidden. The stigma itself perpetuates a cycle of hiding the problems that lead to suicide, and alienating a group of people from being a part of our communities.

Additionally as people of faith we have an obligation to overcome this secrecy, because in some places and in time all too recent we have named mental illness and suicide as sins that were not forgivable by even God. Yet, in John 9:3 when Jesus healed a blind man, and crowds debated if he was blind because of his parents sins, Jesus made it clear that illness was not the cause of some sin, but a reality of the risk of creating life. Making it clear that we as Christians are called to work with God in loving, and bringing healing, instead of the odious custom of judging.

One of the families I worked with in 2012 was the family of young man Christian Cohn. Kim and Tom are his parents and Christian battled with mental illness for much of his childhood. Tom and Kim are unique in that they understood mental illness as parents deeply, before Christian took his own life. Even with this knowledge and all the help they could

find, they still lost Christian to his disease. I want to invite us to listen to their struggle now and their hope for us to grow from understanding Christian's life and their struggle.

VIDEO

I was struck with the courage it took to share those insights with me. Tom and Kim both bravely shared from their hearts about the difficulty of surviving the loss of a child, but even more deeply the struggle of supporting someone with mental illness. They exemplify people of love, Christian people, who have worked to overcome stigma and love as Christ taught us.

Let me share with you a few facts about suicide and steps you can take to prevent suicide, so you leave this place with a few tools to help people struggling with deep despair.

Approximately 90% of those who complete suicide suffer from mental illness. **70-80% of the people who die by suicide give warning signs!** Studies of people who have been institutionalized for depression who later killed themselves all indicate that the period of greatest suicidal risk is not when the people are in the depths of depression, but during the first 90 days after the depression begins to lift.²

If you meet someone facing thoughts of suicide here are some pointers for you to consider:

- Encourage the person to seek treatment. Someone who is suicidal or has severe depression may not have the energy or motivation to find help. If your friend or loved one doesn't want to consult a

² This is a great handout on suicide in Montana, this and that the following pointers come from the handout.

<https://dphhs.mt.gov/Portals/85/suicideprevention/SuicideinMontana.pdf>

doctor or mental health provider, suggest finding help from a support group, crisis center, faith community, teacher or other trusted person. You can help by offering support and advice — but remember that it's not your job to become a substitute for a mental health provider.

- Offer to help the person take steps to get assistance and support. For example, you can research treatment options, make phone calls and review insurance benefit information, or even offer to go with the person to an appointment.
- Encourage the person to communicate with you. Someone who's suicidal may be tempted to bottle up feelings because he or she feels ashamed, guilty or embarrassed. Be supportive and understanding, and express your opinions without placing blame. Listen attentively and avoid interrupting.
- Be respectful and acknowledge the person's feelings. Don't try to talk the person out of his or her feelings or express shock. Remember, even though someone who's suicidal isn't thinking logically, the emotions are real. Not respecting how the person feels can shut down communication.
- Don't be patronizing or judgmental. For example, don't tell someone, "things could be worse" or "you have everything to live for." Instead, ask questions such as, "What's causing you to feel so bad?" "What would make you feel better?" or "How can I help?"
- Never promise to keep someone's suicidal feelings a secret. Be understanding, but explain that you may not be able to keep such a promise if you think the person's life is in danger. At that point, you have to get help.
- Offer reassurance that things will get better. When someone is suicidal, it seems as if nothing will make things better. Reassure the person that these feelings are temporary, and that with appropriate treatment, he or she will feel better about life again.
- Encourage the person to avoid alcohol and drug use. Using drugs or alcohol may seem to ease the painful feelings, but ultimately it makes things worse — it can lead to reckless behavior or feeling

more depressed. If the person can't quit on his or her own, offer to help find treatment.

- Remove potentially dangerous items from the person's home, if possible. If you can, make sure the person doesn't have items around that could be used to commit suicide — such as knives, razors, guns or drugs. If the person takes a medication that could be used for overdose, encourage him or her to have someone safeguard it and give it as prescribed.

Finally you should know that although youth suicide gets more attention, the highest rate of suicide in Montana is actually for adults ages 45-64.³

As I have worked with families I have discovered from friends and our tradition as Christians that are helpful to people facing the loss of a loved one to suicide, things that are not my own, but when my former community in Montana faced these challenges, teachers, friends, and family found great comfort in hearing the following truths from our tradition about their loved ones. I now share from the eulogies on suicide that I have offered to families in need:

Here we sit...with questions and pain.

As you feel that pain, never forget one thing: That pain is directly related to the depth of love you have shared. Love is what gives us healing, life and connection with one another. Your pain is directly related to love, which is a gift you have shared and has been shared with you.

The questions that are left are so many...they linger as if to haunt you. I wish there were easy answers, there aren't.

³ http://bismarcktribune.com/news/opinion/editorial/suicide-rate-now-a-crisis-in-montana/article_f32e177e-1ab1-5de9-bcfb-17268d2ef3c9.html

Most of these questions will never be answered, but there can come peace and assurance to these lingering questions.

As I offer the following reflections, know that this is a long time witness of this church to people struggling with these questions and pain as you are struggling today.

I pray these words offer you hope in the face of pain, and peace when questions go un-answered.

First...suicide is not “God’s will”

No matter what people say...

*What happened was **not** “God’s will.”*

There are well meaning folks who say “God needed them” or “it was God’s time.” These folks are trying to make sense of this tragedy.

*God does **not** will a person with all the possibilities of life ahead to die.*

*God does **not** will people to suffer as you do now.*

*God did **not** will an act of self-violence for our loved one.*

The God I know and have experienced sheds tears when you cry, and holds you tight when you are afraid. God never turns away from any of us.

God passionately desires for us a full life. God dreams with us all that life can be.

*God is about love...God is **for** us.*

Second...none of us is to blame.

Your loved one made a choice, none of you are to blame.

At moments like this...we always ask the “what if’s”

*...What if I had been there?
...What if I had caught that sign?
...What if I knew what he was doing?
...What if I done this or been here or ...what if it was different?*

A choice was made and it was your loved one's choice

It is hard to understand the despair, fear, loneliness, thoughts that filled your loved and for whatever reason, they couldn't see beyond the choice they made.

For many of us, we believe our loved one's life to be free from thoughts of violent act upon themselves. For most of their life this was true, they found ways to live on.

The challenge is for us all to remember your loved one for the moments they were able to overcome challenges, instead of by the time where they did not overcome challenges.

As we consider your loved one's choice, our misery, our grief, even our anger....must not be pointed at ourselves or get lost in all the "What ifs" or "if only"

Instead, may we recommit ourselves

- *Being sure to share love and compassion with one another, to better understand how to help people that may possibly be considering an act of self-violence.*

This would honor your love one more than anything else.

Today, begin to take time to recognize that love exists in us. By sharing compassion and love with friends and family, classmates and new people, we in turn create ways for that love to spread. Consider always those good moments shared with you by your loved one...those moments of kindness and love...those are the moments to carry forward.

In the days ahead it will be important to remember all the times they said, "I love you." Their love is no less valid now, we just cannot feel it in the same way. We wish it were different, but that love is worth carrying on.

Third...There was a time and there are places still where it is taught that those who take their own lives have committed the unforgivable sin – that they leave this life and have no hope in the next.

This is the furthest thing from truth. Jesus, throughout his ministry challenged ideas like these narrow-minded thoughts which are not linked to a God of love.

Everytime that a person claimed to know the limits of God's love, Jesus said...this is nonsense!

Everyone will have life and have it in abundance. That's the plan. For your loved one, for you and for me.

As we hear in the letter to the Romans ..nothing can separate us from the love of God. NOTHING.

As the psalmist proclaims in Psalm 139 ..You can not hide from God's love..God is there with us always...even when it seems dark...God is there. God sees us as wonderfully made creatures, and in despite of our despair God is there with us.

And so, your loved one, was seemingly alone when we lost them. Your loved one was not alone we know that God was there in that place with them.

All along, passionately, God was there holding your loved one tight, shining a light into the darkness. Saying, "you are loved." A moment like so many you shared with your loved one, with your love.

In that moment when your loved one left behind all they knew and loved, they discovered a love greater than any of us can comprehend. In that moment when we don't know if your loved one had love all around them, they did. Your loved one was never alone and they are not alone now.

In the days to come, you will continue to think of "what ifs" and questions:

*Many of which have no answers,
You will grieve, and you will try to make sense of it all.*

As your mind is drawn to these thoughts, I hope you can find comfort in knowing that God was with your loved one in their living and in their dying.

*Pain has been replaced by joy,
Uncertainty has been overcome by grace,
Fear has met its match in love
Our loved one has found a home and a place to live on.*

There will be days when you will feel overwhelmed – sadness, pain grief and loneliness will grip you – know this...the love you shared with your loved one lives on with them.

May you know that God walks with you and with us all. WE are not alone.

God wants us to love and know we are loved...that we are the bearers of peace and light...so never forget...

God is love, and those who live a tenacious life in love live in God, And God lives in them...no matter what.

As I interviewed Christians family last week. Kim shared a story with me that serves to help us understand this broken place in our world in a deep way.

The year prior to Christian's death Kim attended a Christian retreat. On this retreat she received several letters of love from her friends and family, reminding her how much she meant to each of them. As many of us do, she kept those letters in a safe place. One of those spots that makes sense at the time, but later gets in the way of the important thing you are trying to get to.

One day Kim was digging in the cupboard where the packet of her letters was kept. This was after Christian's death. When the packet of letters fell to the ground and out rolled from the pile, one letter.

It was Christian's letter.

As she shared this story with me in tears she said, "He reminded me in the letter that despite all his struggles he loved me, and that he appreciated my love so much."

We are a people of love, our mother's have show us this love, and this love can overcome stigma and pierce the veil of death to remind us we are beloved children of God, no matter illness or if we are lost, God loves us and our love in God is never lost.

Peace, Shalom to you as you continue your journey friends. Amen