

In the Presence of a Loving God: Community and Hope for Mental Illness

A few years ago, I attended a training especially for faith communities offered by the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Central Texas. Early in the day, the Executive Director Karen Ranus told us this story:

When my mother was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor in 2009, our faith community showered our family with casseroles and offers of help that “fed” us both physically and spiritually. Seventeen months after my mother’s death, I almost lost my 18-year-old daughter to suicide. Diagnosed with major depression, anxiety and an eating disorder, she was fragile when we brought her home from the psychiatric hospital. Like any serious health issue, her intense care left us feeling overwhelmed, fearful and lost.

Unlike our experience with my mother’s cancer, the casseroles and offers of help never came. Our faith communities are full of good and caring people who simply don’t know how to respond. We still live in communities where we whisper about mental illness, rooted in the false belief that a flaw in character or a lack of faith is to blame. We’re unsure if we should we include people struggling with mental health concerns on our prayer lists, call them, visit them or make them casseroles. So, we don’t.¹

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and this year it seems especially important to lift up the needs and concerns of people who live with mental illness. The number of adults in the US reporting depression or anxiety has risen dramatically from 11% before the pandemic to more than 40% in the past year.² The causes range from the stress of working in a risky essential job for some, to the distress of job loss by others. Isolation from friends and coworkers or enforced time with family and homeschooling children. To this list we can now add fear of re-entering public spaces and crowds.

The past year has been a trauma for almost everyone, and so all of us are more likely to be experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse - or know someone who is.

Yet, even in times not marked by a worldwide pandemic, mental illness touches almost every family or social group any of us know. I know this as your pastor, because it is very common for people experiencing mental distress to seek out the advice of clergy. I also know this as someone who has experienced mental illness in my own family going back generations.

¹ <https://interfaithtexas.org/building-bridges-to-hope-for-families-impacted-by-mental-illness/>

² <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

There are lots of things a preacher could say to address this issue from the pulpit. I will address two: what does our faith tell us about mental illness and what can the church do to care for those experiencing it.

I want to be very clear: mental illness of any kind is not a sin, it is not demonic possession, and it is not divine punishment. Medical science gives us tools to diagnose a range of mental health conditions that affect mood, thinking, and behavior. And these can vary in severity. Mental illness is caused by complex biological and environmental interactions and you cannot pray or believe your way out of it anymore than you can for any other disease. The most important thing I can say to anyone here today is that God loves each of us completely AS WE ARE. And that includes loving you with any illness you have.

And yet, it is also true that we all hope our relationship with Jesus Christ will transform us in some way. If you or someone you love struggles with mental illness, what would that transformation look like?

Depression, anxiety, addictions, eating disorders, phobias, dissociation, psychosis... these can all lead people to feel profoundly separated from God and from love. We know this not only because of the testimony of people in our own day who tell their stories, but also because we hear those stories in the pages of our scriptures. The Psalms are filled with the full range of human experience, including the anguish of feeling that God is far away - these are the cries of a believer who is experiencing mental suffering.

- Psalm 10 asks: Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
- Psalm 102 pleads: Hear my cry, O Lord; let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress.
- And Jesus himself cried from the cross Psalm 22: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

At times when our mental distress makes God feel far away, it seems natural to ask: what does it mean for my faith if I cannot feel God's presence? In answer, I would point to wisdom from both our scriptures and our spiritual ancestors.

Faith is not an anti-depressant. Jesus told his disciples that following him would not protect them from suffering, and as his modern day disciples, we have to acknowledge that suffering includes all kinds of physical and mental illness.

Yet what faith does offer us is a way to accept that God and suffering coexist. And that following Jesus is a way of transforming our suffering. People who have mental illness and the ones who love them know what it is like to feel relentless, exhausting pain. This pain is neither a curse nor a gift, yet we are invited to carry this pain with us through our life of faith.

One way to think of how our suffering can relate to our faith is through the lens of the cross. Jesus invites those of us who follow him to take up our crosses. Pastor and writer Sarah Griffith Lund writes:

Jesus said that people who want to follow him must take up their crosses. I used to think this was a curse, a sick punishment from God. But what if crosses just exist, like mental illness just exists?...By bearing the cross of mental illness and carrying it, we can move it - not rid ourselves of it or deny it - to a place of transformation like Golgatha. ³

What an image! For Jesus, the cross was an instrument of torture that was transformed into a message of hope and love. In our walk with Jesus, can our crosses - including mental illness - be transformed into a sign of God's presence in our suffering and a sign of healing?

For some of our spiritual ancestors, the desolation of feeling separated from God - which is common for we who have mental illness - is considered an important stage of spiritual development, not a failure of faith. These experiences can remind us of Jesus' own emotional suffering, a way of knowing that God is with us in our suffering. Suffering is not something to be sought or idealized, yet like all of life, it can be a vehicle through which we know Love.

What can the church do? My friends, the church must acknowledge those in our midst who have mental illness and be a community of Love that embraces their faith and their struggles. Karen Ranus, who compared the response of her faith community during her mother's physical illness and her daughter's mental illness, reminds us why this is so important:

But, like all serious health issues, people move into wellness far more quickly and with more confidence and resilience when they are supported by their community of faith. It's time to stop whispering about mental illness and create communities in which we talk openly about mental health and respond to the needs of families impacted. Places of worship can and should lead the way, but faith leaders need education and support.⁴

What can we do to provide a safe space for all our members to share their suffering and struggles, as well as their triumphs and joys? What can we do to help overcome the shame, secrecy, and stigma that haunts families living with mental illness?

There are things we can offer the no other community can.

³ Sarah Griffith Lund, *Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the silence about mental illness, family & Church* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2014)

⁴ <https://interfaithtexas.org/building-bridges-to-hope-for-families-impacted-by-mental-illness/>

- We are people who believe in resurrection, we believe there is HOPE that transcends our current circumstances, whatever they may be.
- We believe that God created humans as beings that are physical, mental, spiritual, and relational - and that our being is in the image of God. That is true no matter the health of the person.
- The church is accessible. We are open to all, regardless of position, education, background, or health status. Church is often the first place people turn during stressful times in their lives. This is true whether the stressor is joyful, like the birth of a child, or a crisis such as job loss or illness. It has been true over the past year as we have all experienced trauma from fear and isolation. I know that the presence of THIS community of faith has been essential to my ability to cope and has been for many of you as well.
- We pray for each other, we bring food at times of loss and grief, we share the burden of suffering so that it is not overwhelming.
- We offer ways for everyone to serve, to have the experience of making a meaningful contribution to our worship, our care of children and adults, our outreach to the community.
- And, I hope, we offer safety. I invite everyone in this congregation to be conscious of making this community one that honors and embraces the image of God in every person who enters our doors - in person, online, or any other way.

There is a word of hope for us in today's gospel. Jesus has just told his disciples he is leaving them and, alone, he prays for them.

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17:11)

Jesus knows he is about to suffer. He is about to be arrested, tried, and executed. And he knows that his followers will suffer as well, simply because they follow him. He prays to God the Father:

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one...As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (John 17:15, 18)

Jesus knows that we will suffer. Our suffering is not a judgment against us. In fact, just as God the Father was with Jesus on the cross, so God is with us in our suffering. God loved the world into existence, and loved us into existence. And it is in the world - with all its joy and all its suffering - that God is with us.

It is our calling as followers of Jesus Christ to share this good news with anyone and everyone who feels hopeless and helpless.

As Jesus prayed for his disciples, we can pray for our own community: Holy Father, protect us so that we may be one. Here, in the world, we can be replace shame, secrecy, and stigma, with community and hope in the presence of a loving God.

AMEN