

“Never Alone”
St. Paul’s Lutheran Church
Hampton, Virginia
June 9, 2019

Scripture: John 14:8-12

In his book, “The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of The Twenty-third Psalm,” Rabbi Harold S. Kushner tells us about an experiment in pain tolerance that was conducted at a major university some years ago. Kushner writes, “A professor of psychology invited several dozen students to measure how long they could keep a bare foot immersed in a bucket of ice water. One of the things he learned was that if there was someone else in the room, a person could keep his foot in the bucket nearly twice as long. The presence of another caring person doubles the amount of pain someone can endure.” We know it to be true. “Guilt feels less deserved, pain is less painful, misfortune is less oppressive, when someone is there with you...It is easier to face a troubling present or an uncertain future when you don’t have to face it alone.” (Kushner, p. 105)

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples, but he promises them the coming of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the Helper, whom God will send to comfort and enlighten them. The Greek word used in this passage is “parakletos” which literally means “called to one’s side” or

“from close-beside” or “to comfort or console”. We are reassured of God’s presence with us. We are not alone. What comfort!

One devotional writer put it this way:

“God with us when the doctor says there is no hope, when our prayers bounce off the ceiling, when our mind will not rest and no solution comes. God with us when we laugh uncontrollably because the stress of life can no longer be caged in and we give way to a giddiness of spirit which lets us release all the anxiety that has stifled us and we dare to be ourselves. God with us when we are so lonely our insides ache with the pain of emptiness when the phone doesn’t ring and no one knocks, and not a single person will look into our eyes.”

When I did my chaplaincy training at Riverside Hospital, I remember visiting a patient in CCU. A man in his early 30’s who had a history of drug and alcohol problems. He had overdosed and was brought into the emergency room during the night. He was feeling depressed, upset, and embarrassed. He was a broken man, a hurting man, a man who needed a word of hope and encouragement. Unfortunately, our conversation seemed awkward. I was not sure what to say. After a few minutes, he asked to be alone. As a young chaplain, I left feeling inadequate and disappointed with myself, and our visit.

A few weeks later, this man came to the chapel looking for me. He told me how much my visit meant to him. He commented, “I don’t remember what you said, but I remember that you were there. I have been in

an AA program, but I never was able to really get beyond the first step because I could not believe in God. Having a visit from a chaplain changed all that. Thank you.” That day I was reminded that though my words to console were inadequate, God was working even still. If we make ourselves available, God will use us to reveal himself to a hurting world. We become the conduits of God’s love and healing presence in a broken world. God’s Spirit works within us and through us. We are not left alone to face life’s challenges.

For the past twenty-five years, I have been serving on the staff of the Peninsula Pastoral Counseling Center, which provides professional counseling that is concerned with the whole person – mind, body, and spirit. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices.

More than 54 million Americans have a mental health issue in any given year, although fewer than 8 million seek treatment. As I reflect on the magnitude of this problem, it saddens me to think of the vast number of people who are suffering in silence.

Even though we have made tremendous progress, there remains a stigma and shame surrounding mental health issues. While it may be easy

for an employee to call into work to say that he has thrown out his back, it takes a lot of courage to say that he is having a panic attack. While friends may rally around someone who is battling cancer, they often distance themselves from someone who is battling depression.

A United Methodist minister who struggled with anxiety and depression put it this way: “Mental illness is like a thief in the night. It can steal our sense of self worth and hopes and dreams for the future. Sometimes we feel alienated from God. We often feel alone, helpless and hopeless in the dark night of despair of our illness.”

Changes in life circumstances and one-time stressful events such as moving, the loss of a loved one, divorce, or a job change can temporarily cause problems in thinking, feeling, and functioning. While difficulties are common when making adjustments and adapting to changes in life, those with mental illness will find the emerging problems will persist longer and impair functioning.

There is much we do not know about mental illness. Is it a chemical imbalance? Is it a character flaw? Is it genetic? Can it be triggered by disturbances in relationships? What is the context in which the behavior is occurring? There appears to be no single cause.

While problems related to mental functioning can range from mild to severe, there are many effective treatments available including medications, therapy, rehabilitation programs, and self-help. No one has to face their perils alone.

As we celebrate Pentecost and the birth of the church, I am reminded that there is much that local congregations can do to make a difference in the lives of those who struggle with mental illness.

Faith communities can help reduce the stigma and become places of hope and healing. People of faith can communicate clearly that mental illnesses are treatable brain disorders and not moral or spiritual failures.

The non-profit Mental Health Ministries suggests several ways faith communities can begin or expand their ministry to and with persons with mental illness and their families including education, welcome and support.

Education is an important way congregations can make a difference. Congregations may invite a speaker to address a mental health issue, provide literature on various mental health concerns, or participate in a community awareness event such as the “Out of the Darkness” walk for suicide prevention.

Another critical way congregations can make a difference is by creating a welcoming environment as a way of breaking down barriers

between “us” and “them.” Hospitality is a core value of all major religions. Clergy can make an effort to be inclusive of people with mental illness in prayers, liturgies and sermon illustrations. Many congregations incorporate the passing of the peace in their services. What if there was also a passing of the hope of our faith?

Finally, congregations can provide support to individuals and families who are struggling with mental illness. Some congregations offer support groups or train members of their congregations to provide pastoral care and the ministry of presence to those who are hurting. Having supportive companions on the journey toward healing, wholeness, and recovery is invaluable to those who are suffering.

You may remember last week’s Gospel lesson in Acts when an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison where Paul and Silas were held. Immediately the doors were open and everyone’s chains were unfastened. Believing all the prisoners would escape, the jailer drew his sword and was about to take his own life when the Apostle Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself. For we are all here.” We are all here. You are not alone.

This is the message we must communicate to those who are suffering in silence. In those moments of desperation, people need hope, and they

need to feel connected. Hope and Connection...That is precisely what our faith communities can offer.

“People with mental problems are our neighbors. They are members of our congregations, members of our families; they are everywhere in this country,” writes Rosalyn Carter, “If we ignore their cries for help, we will be continuing to participate in the anguish from which those cries of help come. A problem of this magnitude will not go away, and because of our spiritual commitments, we are compelled to take action.”

Peninsula Pastoral Counseling Center is grateful to be in partnership with St. Paul’s Lutheran Church. We are grateful to be an extension of your church’s pastoral care ministry.

The Center was organized in 1973 by a group of clergy and laypersons, who felt that there was a need for a counseling center that operated from a faith perspective. Back in the 1970’s and 80’s the field of psychology and mental health seemed to steer away from religion. Freud referred to religion as “nothing more than a mass neurosis.” Religion and spirituality can no longer be simply viewed as an emotional or psychological “crutch,” but for the potential client strengths they consistently represent. At PPCC, we welcome the whole person into the room and that includes the client’s faith of any kind.

In a typical year, our staff collectively puts in close to 7,000 hours of counseling and sees close to more than 600 new clients each year. They are Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans, but a large number of them claim no religious affiliation at all.

The issues that bring people into counseling vary. Most come to PPCC due to relationship difficulties in marriages, families, or the workplace. Many come for help with anxiety or depression. We see people as young as four years-old and as old as people in their eighties.

We could not do what we do without your support and the support of our partner congregations. Our Client Assistance Fund provides financial aid to those who do not have insurance, those with high deductibles, or those who cannot afford their co-pays. Each year our Client Assistance Fund supports close to 1500 sessions.

People need to be reminded that they are not alone in their troubles. They need to be reassured that God is with them. They need to be embraced by God's healing spirit. God works through us to make his presence known to others. We become his hands and feet.

In the Gospel lesson today, Philip was puzzled by Jesus words and requests, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus reminds him that "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." As one theologian

notes, “This was not a claim that the eternal God limited himself to the brief earthly life of Jesus, but that he chose to be uniquely present there.”

And Jesus took this a step further...to the disciples he proclaimed, “Very truly, I tell you the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” (14:12) Jesus was reassuring the disciples and I believe, disciples like us generations later, that his ministry would continue. That good works would continue on this earth in Jesus’ name. That people would continue to teach and preach, to heal and to pray. God would continue the good work through those who believed in Him. Following Christ’s example, others would see God the Father revealed in people like you and me.

And so we are challenged to minister in Jesus’ name, to spread the good news, to give hope, share love and forgiveness, and work towards justice. We, the Body of Christ, use the gifts God has given to us to serve others and build up the church. God works through people like you and me.

I know some hurting couples, who are crying out, “Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” I know some children who have been abused, neglected, misunderstood...They anxiously cry out, “Show us the Father and we will be satisfied. I know a woman in her 40’s who quit her job because of depression. Prior to coming to PPCC she spent most of her time in bed. Through her tears she prays, “Show me the Father, and I will be satisfied.”

God works through churches like St. Paul’s and organizations like Peninsula Pastoral Counseling Center and the work goes on...God is at work

in this world. And maybe, just maybe...the world can see something of the
Father in us and know they are not alone. Amen.

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