

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

October 13, 2019
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 17:11-19
2 Kings 5:1-3,7-15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15

This morning, I am not going to go deep into our scripture. No big explanations or analysis or funny stories to get your attention. I simply want us to spend some time with the power of healing that took place in our Gospel.

I watched social media feeds this week and saw young person after young person post about their struggles with mental health...depression, anxiety, suicide. October 10th was World Mental Health Day. Facebook and Instagram posts started to show up all week with messages of hope and encouragement. Friends, family, and strangers sharing their stories of struggle and survival.

I thought...surely it's important to have a day to highlight these issues but the reality is, after the day is over, after the day of awareness has had its moment on social media, all of those folks, the ones who spoke up to claim their struggle and the ones who were too afraid, or too ashamed, or too fearful to speak, are still struggling. Awareness is important but ongoing love and support is crucial. The need for healing is paramount.

The statistics are shocking. The World Health Organization reports that 450 million people suffer from mental disorders. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in five U.S. adults and one in six U.S. youths ages 6 through 17 experience mental illness.

Mental illness doesn't discriminate based upon age, gender, or race. It's doesn't care if you are wealthy or poor, successful, or talented. It can be isolating...very isolating, like a storm that just sits over your life and won't let up. It can take over your feelings of worth and cause you to doubt your purpose, your ability, your value. For those of you who have experienced mental illness in the past and those of you who are experiencing it now...you know this...it eats away at your soul. It excludes you from joy and happiness. We call it by many names but at the end of the day, what we know is that it hurts. And, at its worst, it can have devastating results.

One person dies every 40 seconds from suicide. Every two hours a person under the age of 25 takes their own life. Every two hours. These are our young people. These are our loved ones.

As I was preparing this sermon, I started looking at these statistics, anything to help me pull together words that had meaning for you this morning. And the reality is that there are no words that can describe the depth of pain and isolation that so many people feel. There is nothing that can even come close to describing the pain and grief of family members who have lost a loved one.

If you suffer yourself, you can get easily caught up in the cycle of self-judgement - why me, why now, why do I feel so bad. You can wonder day after day when you will ever feel good again. Or, if you have lost a loved one or have a friend who is struggling you start to question...did I do enough to help? Why couldn't I have been a better friend or parent or spouse?

Getting a grasp on mental illness makes you feel helpless. I know...I have been there with my father. He battled his own demons and he tried to take his own life. When this happens to you, you find yourself watching your loved one's every move day in and day out. You give constant encouragement, wanting them to know their life is significant and needed and wanted. You pray for healing. They pray for healing.

At the end of the day, mental illness is unfair and it can be hard to figure out how to have hope when things seem so dark.

And, so, I want you to sit with a simple truth this morning...healing is real and it is possible and you are not excluded in any way from the love of God or from God's healing mercy. In fact, God is seeking you out every day, every single minute to bring wholeness back into your life. If you hear nothing else this morning, please hear that.

I sat a long time with the story of the 10 lepers from Luke. I noticed a couple of things that I want you to consider. The first is that they were afflicted by a disease that put them on the outside of society. They were excluded. They hurt. That storm of isolation hung over them in awful ways. Maybe you can relate.

And, they realized they couldn't get better on their own so they called out to Jesus for help. Here's what I love about this story...through all of the years of their struggle, somehow, they had not given up hope. They kept trying even in the darkest and most difficult of times, even in the exclusion and isolation that they surely felt. Somehow, they found an incredible amount of grit and faith to keep going. Help us, Jesus! And, he did.

Maybe that is the message...keep trying. Know that you are loved. Know you are worthy. Know that your life matters. And, know that people are there to help because you are worth every ounce of love and care and support that comes from a community who believes in you. Jesus showed us the depth of this kind of love, this kind of healing. We are simply asked to claim it as our own.

One of my favorite writers, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, reflects on the lectionary each week through poetry and he had this to say about our text from Luke:

*Call to mind all your impurities, your flaws,
your failings public and secret,
what distances you from God, from others,
from your true self, what's disgusting about you.*

*Show yourself to God. You are made clean,
pure, whole, acceptable, good. You're fine.
Imagine all shame, guilt and sorrow gone.
Evaporated. You're perfectly fine.*

The Greek word for “made clean” or “made well” (depending on your translation) is *sozo*. It means not only to be healed but more powerfully, it means to be saved, to be made whole, to be made into what you were meant to be all along. For me, that means all of ourselves, even those places that are depressed and isolated, even those parts that we want to deny and avoid, even those parts we don't want to name, are part of that wholeness. It means God will work with and through our brokenness to create beauty within us. Shame and guilt and sorrow gone.

Holmes writes in another poem for this week:

*Take for yourself this confidence:
that God wishes you well,
and that it shall be so.*

*What afflicts you now
will not determine you.
Already your blessing is decreed.
Go and show yourself.*

What might this good news mean for you? What might it mean for your loved one who is suffering?

God is there to work alongside you in your healing, giving you strength and courage to face each day with hope and perseverance, with grit and indeed with faith. Amen.