

Frequencies of Hope
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
January 24, 2016

Mark 5:21-34

(NOTE: The sermon that was actually preached was an interactive one, due to the number and needs of folks in the pews, which on a snow day was 24 adults, 2 teens and 2 children.)

Here's a little known fact... nearly half of all Americans will meet diagnosis criteria for at least one mental disorder in their lifetime. In any given 12-month period, more than 25 percent of Americans will meet that criteria.¹ Those numbers rise higher in places of poverty, like in urban ghettos and on Indian reservations. It's a major public health concern that we need to do more about.

Some people might think that mental illness is a result of personal failing or spiritual warfare. I tend to believe more in good scientific studies which suggest that what often becomes mental illness usually begins in our biology and history of trauma.

There is no cohesive theological position on mental illness in Christian churches, and congregations vary in their approach when it comes to respect, referrals and support. This can be an issue because people who are struggling with mental illness (and their families) often turn to the church for help. But seminaries and clergy training programs do very little to train us on how to recognize serious psychological distress. And if we pastors can't recognize it, we won't help make a referral or even know to call upon professionals to help us address an individual's needs.

I've grown to accept the fact that a number of the people I will encounter on this ministry journey are going to be struggling or have a family member who struggles with a mental health issue.

¹ According to Matthew S. Stanford, Ph.D., professor of psychology and neuroscience in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences in "Training and Education of North American Master's of Divinity Students in Relation to Serious Mental Illness". Study was based on a survey of 70 seminaries in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico, with 14 church traditions represented.

Some of them will be open about it, and I think that can be really helpful because they can find loving, understanding, compassionate people here at church. But of course some of them will not – they will either be in denial or feel ashamed. Either way, I've learned to gather wise people who are trained as counselors, therapists or psychologists that I can call upon. Because the last thing I want to do is make it worse by saying or doing something stupid.

I remember one time many years ago having lunch with one of these helpers as he discussed some of the signs I should look for if I thought someone was wrestling with depression. Not to diagnose them, mind you, but to try and see their pain earlier so that I might nudge them sooner towards a professional therapist.

This is the list of things he told me to look for:

- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Fatigue, decreased energy
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Loss of interest in activities that were once life giving
- Over-eating or loss of appetite
- Persistent sad or empty feelings and I think the list went on.

Then he went over issues of timing, how we all have these feelings occasionally but if we find we are dwelling in them we should seek help. And then, I remember he looked me square in the face and said:

"There is also another assessment tool that is not clinical but is fairly reliable that you should know about. You can trust it. After you leave someone who seems depressed, notice how depressed you are. If someone is very depressed, you will absorb some of their sorrow, and you will feel it when you leave them. Trust that feeling."

That conversation took place a long time ago. And yet I still remember that moment; it was so striking to me. And maybe you have experienced something like that happen to you too.

Understand that people who are very depressed, bless their good and struggling hearts, are not trying to transfer their sorrow. In fact, most of them would do anything they could so that another human being wouldn't feel the way they do. Left untreated, most can't help but radiate their pain into the folks around them. That's why I, and so many others, advocate strongly for professional mental health treatment.

Likewise, people who are hope-filled and happy transfer that as well, and we absorb their enthusiasm for life when we are around them. In truth, each one of us is like a walking radio transmitter...sending forth into the world that which is inside us. We do it every day.

I imagine Jesus was like that too, radiating out into his world what was inside him. All his goodness, all his accumulated prayers, all his hours of meditation, all his closeness with God, all his encounters loving people, his desire for justice, his hopes for the future, all his compassion, ALL of it was inside him and it radiated out from him each day.

AND SO, as the story goes, when a woman who had been suffering from an invisible disease, hemorrhaging for years, comes up behind him and touched his cloak, something happened. A little bit of what he had carried inside him came out.

Twelve bad years, washed away. That which left her tired and frail; drained of money, and sapped of hope – was suddenly gone. She was healed because she reached for that healing energy which flowed out of Jesus every minute, all the time. All the time.

Well, as his followers, we love and emulate our brother Jesus... so maybe we should ask ourselves what we are sending forth into the world? How do we care for those who suffer? What frequencies do our radio-transmitter-selves send out into the universe?

The answer lies, in part, by thinking about what is inside us.

If, like Jesus, we are full of prayer and meditation, hope, love for justice, compassion, and the “good news” of our faith, then we will splash that stuff all over everyone we meet.

And likewise, if we are full of junk, then we’ll splash that all over everyone we meet.

So how about you? Are you a clear and open vessel full of the spirit of God, full of prayer and gratitude, full of love, connection with others, joy, hope and goodness? If yes, then that is what everyone in your sphere of influence is receiving from you when we interact with you (and the world needs lots more of that!).

But if you are a little low on those inner deposits of prayer, meditation, service and connection; and a little high on reserves of negativity, criticism, judgment, anger and other junk, we'll absorb that stuff when we interact with you.

Because like our brother Jesus, we radiate what's inside us.

For me the good stuff is time spent in prayer and meditation, conversations with friends, cooking with my family, reading people like Brene Brown, Brian McClaren, Phyllis Tickle, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; and simply drinking more water.

What's the good stuff for you? Maybe it is going to Mohegan Sun or Foxwoods and feeling the adrenalin that comes with taking risks like gambling, but I doubt it.

Your good stuff is likely found at a 12 step group, like AA or Gamblers Anonymous.

Maybe your good stuff it is watching TV detective shows filled with violence and mayhem, it's a great way to unwind and disconnect! But I doubt it.

Your good stuff is probably found in watching a multi-colored sunset settle in the hills.

Maybe it is telling your friend a funny ethnic joke, everybody likes to laugh!

But I doubt it.

Instead, your good stuff might be talking to them about privilege and racism and how to address the brokenness in our society.

If we want to radiate light and love, God's grace and goodness, patience and generosity...we need to fill up on the good stuff... those things that bring a truer joy and peace like singing and dancing, praying and meditating and sharing God's abundance.

Especially when the world outside is wrapped in darkness, ice and cold like it is today!

Jesus was so full of prayer, love, healing and goodness that the woman who had suffered for twelve long years and merely touched the tassel of his cloak was healed. Well my friends, the good news on this snowy morning is that WE CAN BE LIKE JESUS... transmitting out what is inside us.

The church, as the body of Christ in the world, can be such a positive place to find compassion and healing for the soul.

We also need to remember that sometimes we will be like the woman, crawling towards one another, hoping to receive the good stuff that is radiating out from our neighbors. Searching for connection, hoping for something more. Fortunately, there are many people here at MCC that will pick up on that frequency, and give the help that is needed.

Because we give out what we have taken in.
We bestow what we have accumulated.
We exhale what we have inhaled.

Let those with ears to hear, listen. Amen.