

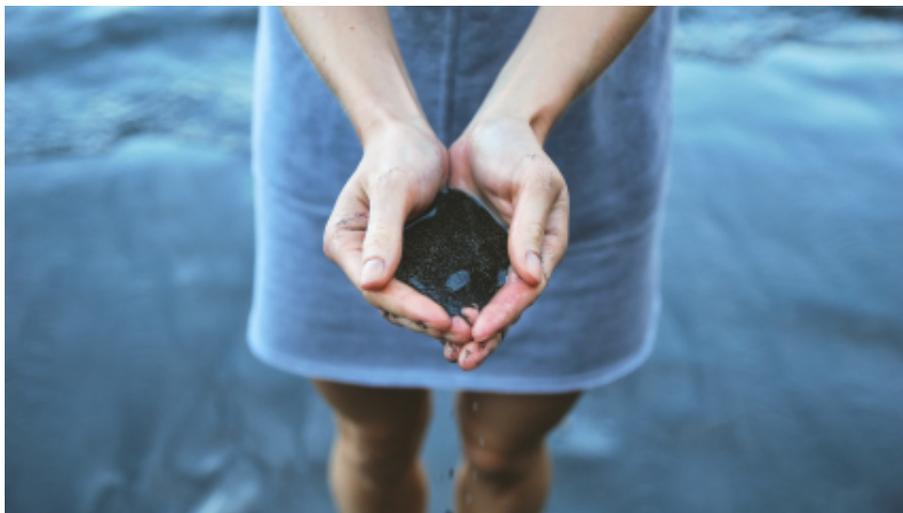
Craft of Preaching

Theology and Interpretation

Working with texts and placing them within a theological framework.

Preaching + Mental Illness

Saturday, July 08, 2017 1:22 PM | Sarah Griffith Lund | 1 Comments



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“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” Romans 8: 6

I start with a deep, centering breath prayer. Closing my eyes, breathing in, I ask God to use me. Breathing out I ask God to reach someone through the stories I will share. Then I open my eyes and step into the pulpit. I am ready to break the silence about mental illness, family and church. I am ready to share God’s story of redemption through my own experiences of loving family members with severe and chronic mental illness. I know this to be true: the Gospel is everywhere, even in the shadows of brain disorders and diseases.

It turns out, the Church is ready, too. I’ve heard from preachers around the country that when they preached a sermon about mental health struggles, they tapped into a deep longing of the people to hear their own life reflected back to them through the lens of scripture. They are surprised at the doors that open and the people that come flooding in.

A colleague of mine, Rev. Tim Ahrens of First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio, preached a sermon series last summer called “Mental Illness: The Journey In, The Journey Out,” getting coverage in

the local newspaper and filling the pews unlike any summer he'd ever seen. It turns out that when we preach about how mental health challenges impact our lives, our families and our communities, we are preaching the gospel: loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We know that one in five people will be impacted by personal experiences of mental health challenges in any given year. Despite how common depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges are, in the church we are often silent about this kind of suffering. Mental Illness is known in the church as the “non-casserole” disease. The historic shame and stigma associated with mental illness creates real barriers to getting treatment because people keep silent for fear of being judged, rejected or abused.

For too long the Church has interpreted mental illness as the result of sin. Today we know much more about the human brain. We know that our mental health is physical health and that diseases of the brain result not from sin, but from a complex web of causes such as environmental, hereditary, experiential, and other causes. The spiritual struggle comes when we, along with Paul in his letter to the Romans, call ourselves “wretched” even though God calls us “beloved.” Mental illness often makes it harder to be confident in God’s love because of the ways it damages our self-esteem; unconditional love seems unfathomable. Part of the preacher’s prophetic role is to make it clear that our sufferings related to mental illness are not punishments from God and are not the fault of our own moral or spiritual “failings.”

We as preachers can also model health and wholeness by getting an annual depression screening or a “check-up from the neck-up,” and mentioning it as a normal occurrence. Preaching on mental illness can be followed up with resources from our larger church bodies, such as the United Church of Christ Mental Health Network (<http://mhn-ucc.org>). My book, *Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the Silence about Mental Illness, Family and Church* (Chalice Press, 2014) can be used for discussion, or referenced in preaching.

Preacher, you can bring a hopeful and healing word to God’s people. Take this opportunity now to shine a light of hope, quite possibly saving someone from despair. There is really no greater honor or responsibility of the pulpit.

Here are some entry points in the RCL for preaching about mental health:

Romans 8: 5-8 (Pentecost 6A; July 16, 2017) "Set your minds on things of the Spirit" presents an opportunity to say how difficult it is to control our minds, and that self-control is not the only force at work in mental health.

Psalms 139:7-14 (Pentecost 7A; July 23, 2017) “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Naming examples of mental illness in a list of other characteristics that may each be part of our inward parts can help normalize mental illness. We are not our diagnoses; we are children of God, wonderfully made.

Psalm 23 (Pentecost 19A, Easter 4ABC) “The darkest valley” - Naming depression and other mental illness when this familiar text is read reminds people that God will comfort and not abandon them.

Mark 5:1-17 (Pentecost 4B) and **Luke 8:26-37** (Pentecost 5C) - When we read the story of the Gerasene demoniac, we must assert that mental illness is *not* demon possession by another name. Jesus' command to “go home to your friends” is an opening to talk about the understanding and community support needed by people who struggle with mental health challenges. These Scriptures occur in the RCL at the beginning of summer, so could kick off a summer sermon series or adult education series about mental illness.

Psalm 40: 1-2 (Epiphany 2A) “He drew me up from the desolate pit,” connects to the way people with mental illness describe their symptoms. This is an opportunity to talk about the difference between situational sadness and mental illness so severe we cannot pull ourselves out.

Tags: mental health, depression, anxiety, preaching life, Summer Preaching, Theology and Interpretation, Sarah Griffith Lund

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Scott Griffith (July 08, 2017 at 07:58 PM)

I am proud of your advocacy for people like me to feel welcomed to the church. It helps me in my struggle because psychological symptoms often make faith more difficult. Thank you for reaching out!

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