

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Mental Illness and the Christian Disciple”**

**Psalm 22:1 – 11, 14 – 15, 19 – 21.
Mark 3:20 – 17**

January 25, 2015

This morning I want to spend a little time talking about mental illness... and the effect that mental illness can have, and often does have, on our life of Christian faith. This is a vast subject, and we can only cover a tiny fraction of it in a fifteen or twenty minute sermon. But it's an important subject, and something that I think we need to talk about. So, we'll give it our best shot, and hopefully we'll accomplish some good.

Now, before we begin, I want to offer a quick word of explanation. When I say “mental illness,” I'm talking about the whole wide range of afflictions which affect our minds. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, a mental illness is *“a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, or ability to relate to others and daily functioning.”*

That's a pretty broad definition, and it includes: depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, obsessive/compulsive disorders, and a number of other maladies. So, it's important that we understand that there are a lot of ways in which we, or those we know and love, can be affected by mental illness; and what I hope to do in this sermon, is to give us some encouragement and guidance for successfully dealing with it, when it intrudes itself into our lives.

Okay, I want to start out by briefly sharing two personal experiences from my own life. The first one happened during my middle year at Princeton Seminary, in 1983-84. Sylvia and I had moved from Fullerton to Princeton the year before, and everything had gone pretty smoothly. New Jersey was a huge culture shock from Southern California... but we were adjusting fairly well, and looking forward to our second year as Princetonians. Life was just sailing right along until, out of the blue, without any warning, I started having severe anxiety attacks. Everyone in my family tends to be on the nervous side, so I was used to the odd bout of anxiety from time to time; but this was something different.

I was still going to class and doing my Sunday field education job down in South Jersey... but my concentration was shot, I couldn't sleep worth a darn, and my stomach was tied in knots all the time. Eventually, things got so bad that I feared I was losing my faith, losing my mind, losing my ability to cope and function. Finally, one day, I suggested to Sylvia that I abandon seminary altogether, and that we retreat to Southern California... back to where our families were.

Well, fortunately I have a wise, strong, and courageous wife... and by that time we were meeting with an equally wise, strong, and courageous counselor. And through the guidance of our counselor, and the support of my wife, I was able to weather the storm, stay in seminary, reaffirm my tottering faith, and, eventually, wind up here this morning talking to you. Through that experience, I learned that my problem was really my fear of leaving home and taking my place in the world of full-fledged adulthood and responsibility. The 3,000 mile move to Princeton was the straw that finally broke the tie of security that I'd always had with my Mom and Dad. And it was

now time for me to grow up, be a man, and fend for myself and my wife. The process of accomplishing all that was very rocky, and very scary, and a very strong test of my faith and my strength as a person. But I made it! Much to *your* joy and benefit!

The second experience I want to share with you, happened about a year or so later. We were still living in Princeton, and I was finishing up my senior year... getting ready to graduate and embark on my one year clinical chaplaincy training program. By this time we were attending a local church not far from the seminary. The pastor's name was Dave something-or-other... but we always called him "Smiling Dave," because he was one of these guys who believes that Christians should be happy and smiling all the time... twenty-four hours a day.

Anyway, he preached a sermon one Sunday, during which he told the story of someone who had come to him for counsel... because he was depressed and having doubts about his faith. And what did good old Smiling Dave say to his parishioner who was doubting and depressed? Well, according to Dave, he told him that, if he really knew Jesus, he'd never *have* any doubts! And, how can you be *depressed* if Jesus is really in your heart? Real Christians don't have doubts... and real Christians don't get depressed! Real Christians are joyous and full of faith *all... the... time!*

Sylvia and I sat there listening to this... and we were shocked. I mean, we were dumbfounded! Pastor Dave had completely destroyed this hurting, struggling church member... by giving him the completely absurd counsel that "real" Christians don't waver in their faith, or suffer from mental illness. You can be sure that that was *the* last time that we ever attended that church.

I think that these two experiences from my days as a Princeton seminarian, give us some important insights into mental illness, and the effect that it can have on our life and our faith. And what I want to do with the rest of my sermon time this morning, is to highlight some key things to keep in mind as we think about this very important subject... which can, and does, present so many challenges to our lives.

And the first thing to mention is that mental illness is, at the end of the day, just like any other disease: it's no respecter of persons. In other words, anybody can be afflicted by it. Some of us may be more prone to, say, depression or anxiety or obsessive/compulsive disorders, than other people... as I said before, my family seems to be pretty much hardwired for anxiety; but every last one of us is susceptible to some form or other of the disease.

It doesn't matter if you've got a loving spouse and kids, or if you're financially well-off, or if you like your job, or if no one in your family has ever had mental health issues before. Mental illness can still sneak up and bite you on the behind, just when you least expect it.

Which brings us to the second important thing to remember, which is this: there's no disgrace in being afflicted with mental illness. It's nothing to be ashamed of, it's nothing to be embarrassed about, it's not some sign that you're a loser, or a failure, or an inferior human being. In fact, mental illness is often the sign that you *are* a human being! And that the stresses, and challenges, and responsibilities of life have just beaten you down to the point where you need some help in coping with it all. And there is simply nothing wrong or humiliating to find ourselves in that situation.

Of course, the world around us sees things differently, right? I mean, from time immemorial, we've been surrounded by a culture that stigmatizes the mentally ill, and which

equates mental illness with weakness, or inferiority, or lack of courage and character. The strong and successful, so we're constantly told, can't be derailed by such trifles as depression, or anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Well, that's just a bunch of pure diddly-poo, folks. And we're probably never more susceptible to being ambushed by mental illness, than we are when we think we're too strong, or too smart, or too "together" to be hit with it. If you're dealing with mental illness, you're not weak, stupid, lazy, or a community pariah. You're a typical person, dealing with an all too common reality of life.

Okay, so what about mental illness and our life of faith? I mean, was Pastor Smiling Dave at least partly right? Shouldn't our faith in Christ protect us from some of the ravages of some forms of mental illness? Well, the answer to that question is... possibly. There are undoubtedly some Christians who handle things like anxiety and depression better because of their faith; and some people who care for a mentally ill loved one may find peace, and a sense of calm and hope, in their ongoing relationship with Jesus. And that's a wonderful thing.

But you see, it's one thing to say that "some Christians deal with mental illness better because of their faith;" and a very different thing to say that "Christians should *never* have to deal with mental illness at all!" I don't care how strong our faith is, or how long we've been Christians, or how well we know the Bible: sometimes, for some people, often for reasons we will never completely understand... mental illness hits us like a freight train, and we just don't have the personal, spiritual, reserves to stop it.

That's not an automatic sign of weak faith, or bad faith, or no faith. It doesn't mean that you're a lousy Christian. It doesn't mean that you're going straight to hell because you don't really have Jesus in your heart. No, it means that you've been run over by an illness that's more than you can handle. And you are no more a "bad" Christian than the church member with cancer, or heart disease, or arthritis, or any other physical ailment.

Now, from time to time, I've heard some knucklehead pastor say something like, "If you only had more faith, you'd be able to get up out of that wheelchair or hospital bed!" As if the only reason anybody's ever sick at all, is because they just don't have enough faith in Jesus. Most of the time, we hear something like that, and we realize instinctively that it's a bunch of nonsense. Well, we also need to recognize the inherent nonsensicalness of someone who says, "If you only had more faith, you wouldn't have bipolar disorder! If you just had Jesus in your heart, you'd be free from your panic attacks!" That's just not a biblically sound, theologically defensible position.

And we also need to remember that some forms of severe mental illness are caused by organic problems or chemical imbalances deep in the recesses of our brain; and you simply can't think, or believe, or will yourself out of it. It has nothing to do with having faith in God, or not having enough faith in God... it has to do with the wiring inside our head being out of whack somehow.

And there is nothing in the universe... seriously, in the whole known *universe*; that's more complex and difficult to figure out than the workings and connections in the human brain, and the human mind. Some of the greatest scientific thinkers on the planet have devoted their lives to understanding how our brains can sometimes cause our minds to misfire; I mean, these people have won Nobel Prizes for their work. And *still* there is so much that we don't know and don't understand about the human mind... and very possibly never will. So to say, "Have more faith in

Jesus, brother, and you'll be just fine!" is simply to blow the problem off. And it's to completely misunderstand the way in which a lot of mental illness actually works.

In fact, over the years, many very strong and devout Christians have suffered terribly with various forms of mental illness. The great 16th century Reformer, Martin Luther, was afflicted with severe bouts of depression; and many New Testament scholars have identified clues in the letters of the Apostle Paul which suggest that he, too, suffered from depression. And Paul clearly admits that he was often wracked with great anxiety. So, what... Luther and Paul didn't have any faith? Those guys were weak-kneed, namby-pamby Christians? I don't think so!

And here's something else we need to remember, and that is that, sometimes, even if we don't have someone on the outside questioning our faith when we're dealing with a mental illness... we can question our *own* faith, ourselves, because of the struggle we're going through. As I indicated earlier, one of the things that happened to me when I was going through my serious anxiety problem in seminary... was that I was terrified that I was losing my faith. I kept reading the Bible, and praying, and listening to Christian music... but nothing seemed to help; so I began to fear that maybe God wasn't really there... or, if He was there, maybe He'd abandoned me.

It was a very unpleasant experience, and it just added fuel to the anxiety and depression that I was already feeling. And clinical studies that have been done with religious people in the grip of mental illness have shown that this is one of the most common things that happens: that we experience a sometimes devastating disruption in our own sense of our relationship with God. Not that God has abandoned us or given up on us; but that our battle with the illness has caused us to *feel* as if we've been abandoned, or that God is angry with us somehow, or that we're losing our faith, or being plagued with doubts, and so on.

For a person in that condition, the *last* thing that I, as a pastor, should ever say is, "Well, you must not have Jesus in your heart, then!" or, "You must not have any faith, because if you did, you'd be happy and living large in the love of the Lord!" For someone in the throes of mental illness, statements like that are simply devastating. Instead, a proper pastoral response would be to remind the person that they're not alone; and that they've not been abandoned by the Lord; and that there's more to their faith than just the way they're feeling at the moment; and, perhaps most of all, that there's *hope* for them to make their way to a place of better mental health. All of which is 100% true.

I want to wrap things up with a few words of encouragement for anyone who is either struggling with one of the many forms of mental illness... or dealing with an afflicted family member or friend. And the first encouragement is to remember, as I said before, that you're not alone. You're not alone in the illness; you're not alone in the doubts and fears that the illness is causing; and you're not alone in needing a helping hand to find your way out of the maze of frazzled thoughts and feelings that mental illness leaves in its wake. Others have been where you are at; and they understand what you're going through. And if you'll allow them, they'll help you through the ordeal.

Second, no matter what form of mental illness you or your loved one might be facing, there's always hope for healing; for the effects of the illness to be conquered, or at least coped with and kept under control. One of the worst aspects of mental illness is the fear that you're never going to get any better; that the way you're feeling right now is the way you're going to feel forever. That's a fear that almost never comes to pass... but when you're stuck in the middle of

the struggle, it's nearly impossible to see the light at the end of the tunnel. You need to know that there *is* hope, and that things *will* get better, and that the illness is *not* going to be your undoing.

Third, we must remember that seeking help for a mental illness is *not* a sign of weakness! Countless people over the years have refused to ask for help, because it goes against the grain of rugged, macho, self-reliance that's been a hallmark of American culture. It seems that, if there's a stigma attached to having a mental illness in the first place, there's an even bigger stigma attached to seeking treatment for it. And that's just plain ridiculous.

Seeking help for depression, or anxiety, or any other mental illness isn't a sign of weakness... it's a sign of strength, and courage, and wisdom. Languishing in a state of mental or emotional unhappiness when there's help available to you, isn't a sign of strength... it's a sign of foolish stubbornness and a misplaced sense of bravado. If your body is sick, you go to the doctor and ask for help. Well, if your mind is sick, you should go to a counselor or therapist, or your doctor, or your pastor, and ask for help. I mean, why continue to suffer, when there are people and medications that can help you? I don't think that's weak... I just think that's smart!

Finally, be very sure of the fact that, if you suffer with mental illness, or if you seek treatment for mental illness... *this* pastor is never, *ever*, going to tell you that you're a lousy Christian or that you have no faith. No, this pastor will say, "I hear you. I'm with you. And the Lord is with you, too... every step of the way." That's a fact. And that's a promise.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.