

Sermon

Have you ever had an idea in your head - and it's a really good idea. And you have really high hopes for it and really big expectations. And as you work toward the reality of it all, you realize that it is way too big? That you can't possibly do it all? That what you envision is more than what is possible? Yeah?

Fair warning - this sermon may be one of those!

So given that - let me tell you what I want us to leave here knowing. If you are someone who struggles with mental health - or who is struggling now - or supporting someone who is: You are not alone. You have not failed in your faith - your struggle is not because you do not trust enough. Your disease may make it hard for you to feel loved - but you are - by this community and by God.

If mental health is NOT your struggle right now - I am so thankful - and also - I want you to realize that more than 1 in 5 adults - and just as many children over the age of 3 are struggling with some sort of mental illness that is disruptive to their lives. And so I hope you leave this space empowered to recognize and reach out to the siblings around you. Because look around - 1 in 5. That's a lot of us.

And lastly I want for all of us to recognize that we have an opportunity - and perhaps a calling to see mental health through a lens of community - where we make space for honesty, give permission to one another to rest, see the ways that caring for others can be healing to everyone, and remember that we belong to one another - and can hold more together than we can by trying to go it alone.

That's kind of a lot for one sermon - not sure I can do it all - but at least now you know the goal.

When Ben and I were brainstorming topics for this series - 21st Century Faith - we knew that mental health needed to be on the list. We started dreaming of how much healthier we might all be if instead of a mindset of, "OH....you have a therapist, what's wrong with you?" we could somehow create a world - or just a community that was closer to, "OH - you don't have a therapist, what's wrong with you?" Where seeking help - or even just a check-up could be as normal as visiting your primary care physician. Where having difficulty with bi-polar would get you as many casseroles as cancer. Where mental illness was not a source of shame - and where we assume we need community in order to find mental health.

Unfortunately for the Biblical scholars you hired to pastor you - there aren't really great scriptures about mental health. Mostly because it is a paradigm that did not exist in Jesus' time. There was not a concept for the chemical, electrical, neurological understanding that we bring to mental healthcare today. But there are a lot of scriptures about how we care for one another and for ourselves - especially in times of great need.

When our scripture from Mark begins - the disciples have all gathered back together after having been sent out by Jesus to proclaim good news all over - they have been caring for the sick, traveling, listening to the needs of others, sometimes being rejected, discerning how much they can do and when they need to move on - it has been a lot on them. Plus - they have all just found out that Jesus' cousin and friend and mentor, John the Baptist has been brutally murdered - so you can imagine that the grief and fear is weighing heavily upon all of them.

The first thing Jesus has them all do - is find some space to rest. Their rejuvenation is necessary and Jesus prioritizes their health - mental, physical and emotional health.

Of course the needs of those around them do not go away - the crowds seek Jesus and the disciples out again. They are waiting for them when their boat reaches the shore. But somewhere and somehow on that trip across the lake - Jesus is restored enough to have compassion on the crowds. Compassion that may not have been possible if he hadn't tended to his own needs for a bit.

Jesus spends time preaching and teaching and listening to the crowds - until the hour grows late. And the disciples look around and they recognize that they are surrounded by need. The people are hungry. Likely the disciples are hungry too. And they go to Jesus hoping he will send them away to take care of themselves.

But Jesus does not - he says to the disciples: You feed them. Which may be better translated as y'all - all y'all feed them. Jesus makes it clear that recognizing the need of a neighbor is only the first step. This is also a communal calling to act.

Jesus sends the disciples out to see how much bread they have - and here's the thing- they found even more than they were looking for - they look for bread, but they find bread AND fish. We are living in a reality when mental health resources feel scarce - but I wonder what happens when we start helping each other look - what abundance may we find hiding in pockets we wouldn't have thought to look in before?

After the disciples bring Jesus the bread AND the fish that they have found - Jesus divides the crowd into smaller groups. In other words, he makes the food distribution more manageable - How are we invited to take a really huge issue like Mental healthcare in the US and break it down into smaller, more manageable chunks - how might thinking like that break us out of our helplessness and overwhelm?

Now Jesus and the disciples did not fix hunger. They fed a crowd - a sizeable one to be sure - but they fed them one meal. Every single person in that crowd would be hungry again - and Jesus did not ask the disciples to fix that. He simply invited them to meet the need in front of them.

And then immediately - he moves everyone back to a posture of self-care. Not because the work is done but because it is time to rest - they all need it. He dismisses the crowds, he puts the disciples back on the boat to recharge, and he himself takes a break to pray. This is

communal self care - not in the sense that everyone needs to be together to take care of themselves - they go in different ways - but in that they all have to do different things in order for each one to get what they need. The disciples have to be willing to go on the boat without Jesus in order for him to do what he needs to be healthy. The crowds have to be willing to find their next meal for the disciples to do what they need to be healthy. We need each other to practice good self care and keep balanced.

Now I need to be clear - the term self care gets thrown around a lot. But I am not talking about a warm bubble bath and a glass of wine - while those things may bring some relaxation and rest - they will not heal someone's mental illness.

But helping someone get time to focus on their wellness can help. Could you babysit while someone goes to therapy? Or bring over a meal because the exhaustion from being anxious all day but pretending you are not can require as much rest as recovering from a surgery? Or send a card? Or pray? Or do someone's laundry?

Of course you can! This community is amazing. It is filled with compassionate and loving people. Y'all do this stuff all the time. You are really good at it. You count it as a privilege to be able to reach out.

But it can be hard to know - because of the stigma and the shame and the multiple ways in which most of us hate to ask for help - it is hard to know who might need a hand.

So how can we take steps toward being a community that is not only WILLING to help - cause I know y'all are. But also a community that ASKS for help? That tells one another the truth about our hurts?

I had my first panic attack a year ago this last January. It was a few weeks before Ezra's surgery. I was terrified. And it had been building - the anxiety had been building - likely for years. And I stuffed it until my body simply refused to let me stuff it anymore. And it stopped working right. I couldn't breathe. Quite literally.

And there's a little window into why I make us all take deep breaths - I need them too. Funny how things come around isn't it?

I am not telling you this as a way of asking for help. I am actually doing really well right now. My family has been amazing. Our staff is so good at working together. I have a fabulous therapist, good friends. And some good drugs. And I've worked really hard. I am a poster child for seeking help early - it is much easier to take your life from a B+ back to an A than it is to take it from a D to an A. I may need to ask for help again - healing isn't linear - but today is not that day.

And if me saying the quiet part out loud helps even ONE of you who are struggling feel less alone - then that's why I am telling you. Or if ONE of you reaches out to someone you think may be hurting - then that's also why I am speaking it. Because I believe this community

really is a place where you can share your mental illness without judgment or shame - and really is a group of people who will help if you ask for it.

If you are still sitting there feeling like you need to take better care of your pastor - or feeling like you shouldn't have leaned on me - please stop. Truly - I feel your love and love you back. But that little explosion of compassion you feel in your chest - I really want you to share it with someone else. And I promise I am doing well right now.

So let me remind you of all 7000 things I wanted this one little sermon to do as we close. I want you to know you aren't alone - and you are loved - no matter what your disease may want you to believe. I want you to recognize that there are a lot of people all around us who are hurting and we can reach out to each other in very real ways. I want you to trust that this is a place where we can be honest about our struggles - and then live into that - and respond with compassion and care. And I want to suggest, that like the feeding of the 5000, caring for needs - physical, mental, and emotional - is a communal act - not all of it falls onto your individual shoulders but neither are you exempt from it. We need each other.

So join me in a few deep restorative breaths....

Amen