

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter 6-B; 6 May 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

May is Mental Health Month

In nomine...

I. Intro

I would like to invite you this morning to take a look around you. See the body of Christ in all its splendor. We are the body of Christ, and we consist of all kinds of different bodies. We are tall and short, heavy and slender, male and female. We have different hues of skin and different arrangements of hair. We look around and we can see all kinds of differences.

As we look around, though, there are even more differences we don't see and aren't even aware of. There are different lung capacities and heart rates. Maybe you have a cold or maybe your allergies are killing you: it can be hard to tell the difference sometimes. Different blood sugar levels, heart rates, and body temperatures. Some of us struggle with diabetes, some with high blood pressure, and some with arthritis. There are different cancers percolating inside some of us or even all of us, mostly not yet detected, but maybe a few we know about as well.

None of us makes it through life without a little bodily sickness here and there. Most of us will experience quite a bit of it. Illness is one of the little indignities of aging that we all acknowledge with a chuckle: what else can you do? All the exercise, vitamins, and vegetables in the world may strengthen your immune system so that you're not ill as often. Or it could just be a lucky genetic inheritance.

Just as none of us makes it through life without some experience of bodily distress, none of us makes it through without an experience of mental distress. It may be triggered by a dramatic event – like a birth or a death, a wedding or a funeral – or it may be a genetic inheritance, or it may stem from some other environmental factor that we don't even see, like the germs that caused your last bout of the flu.

But isn't it strange how much stigma attaches to mental illness as opposed to bodily illness? It's the unseen and unknown that causes fear and prejudice. It's like when AIDS was first spreading and everyone was worried whether they might catch it from a public toilet seat.

On the website of the Diocese of New Jersey, there is this quote:

The advice of a mentor in ministry was that an effective spiritual leader needed to have three things: a therapist (check), a gym membership (check), and a spiritual director (check). I believe the balance of these three things have brought balance to my ministry.

I like these suggestions and I'm still working on implementing them fully. I wasn't always all that excited to have a therapist. Wouldn't having a therapist imply that there was something less than ideal about my mental or emotional state?

Well, yes, in fact it would! There comes a time in every life when the things you always knew about yourself turn out not to be as true as you thought. A time to re-evaluate important events that have defined your behaviors and emotions for decades, but which might have a different meaning than what you originally thought. It is a therapist who created a safe context for me to explore these existential questions and who guided me through a re-evaluation of what they meant. She helped me through a particularly sticky patch. Life isn't always clear sailing.

A mental health professional has trained and prepared to help one encounter the unseen things inside, to take what is mysterious and makes one different and to learn how to integrate it all into a functioning, productive, joyful life. A mental health professional is one who teaches me how to honor God with all of who I am, my experiences and my hang-ups, my fears and my anxieties, my quirks and idiosyncrasies and, yes, even my depression.

II. Thesis

May is recognized by many as Mental Health month. Once upon a time I didn't want to see a therapist because that would be to suggest that I might not be mentally "normal." For many people, mental illness is a scary idea. It can be hard to understand because it is usually invisible. Mental illness is frequently stigmatized – not because it is any worse than other conditions that challenge us in life, but just because we're scared of what we don't know. Isn't it always the unknown that awakens fear and prejudice in us?

Just as this week's epistle talked about Peter overcoming his prejudices about race and last week's epistle talked about Philip overcoming prejudices about sexual identity, so many people coping with mental illness find themselves to be victims of prejudice and fear – just for the simple mistake of being themselves.

III. Good News

In our Epistle today, Peter was at the house of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile, and everyone knew that Gentiles weren't God's people. And Peter wasn't at the house of just any Gentile: Cornelius was a centurion, a Roman soldier, one of the hated occupiers who desecrated the temple, wreaked havoc across the country, and perpetrated no end of injustice upon the occupied Jewish people. But here we are: Peter can plainly see the presence of the Holy Spirit in these people in whom the Holy Spirit has no business being! Peter had felt a certain prejudice about these Gentiles. God showed him otherwise. As he baptized Cornelius and his family, Peter was challenged to grow in his understanding of who both God and neighbor might be!

Jesus' command to his disciples, the command the Holy Spirit has seen fit to convey to us through the Gospel of John, is that we love one another. Jesus knew who his disciples were, he knew their strengths and weaknesses, he knew their failings and challenges, and he loved them each one.

One of my favorite things about reading about the saints of old is that the ones we remember, the ones whose lives got recorded and passed down, are remembered because they were so remarkable. And by remarkable, I mean diagnosable. It seems like encounters with the Holy Spirit might have the effect of loosening one's moorings to what some would call "neuro-typical" as these saints live with a foot in both worlds: human society and the Kingdom of God.

Twice in our passage today we read that Jesus' command is that we love one another: this is the work of the Christian faith.

It is most often fear of the unknown that puts barriers between us and other people. Fear is at the heart of racism, sexism, xenophobia, prejudice against those with different sexual identities, and discrimination against those with different mental configurations. But what was Jesus'

message to Mary when she came to his tomb, to his disciples, and finally to St. Thomas another week later?

Do not fear!

IV. Invitation

This is what I love about St. Thomas: we are not afraid to love one another. I have found welcome here for those who are different from ourselves. We embrace those with different theologies, different political opinions, and different aesthetic tastes. We celebrate those who can cook different cuisine, those who serve with different skills, and those who participate in different ministries. Together we find that we are much more than we are as individuals. It is the Holy Spirit that knits us together and makes us not a club, but the Church.

So as we recognize May as Mental Health month, our calling as Christians is to be on the front lines of the fight against prejudice, welcoming among us those who might not find welcome elsewhere. That is what Christ did with his disciples, and what the church has been known for down through the centuries since the very beginning.

Mental illness, just as bodily illness, is a part of all our lives, whether we are willing to admit it or not. The fact that therapeutic protocols aren't as well-developed for mental healthcare as they are for care of the body does not make mental illness shameful or sinful or otherwise worse than anything else we struggle with. There's no cure yet for the common cold either!

When you have a cold, please stay home. That stuff's contagious.

When you're struggling with an emotional or mental difficulty, come to church! You may not see it behind our Sunday clothes, but we're all struggling with our own stuff as well. Church is where we practice being human, being what God created us to be. It is those challenges that define us, shape us, and help bring our souls into expression in our bodies.

God made our minds: they are one more avenue of grace and encounter with God. When times are tough, you may need a doctor, just as when that sore throat won't go away. But just like you

don't need a physical body with six-pack abs to be a Christian, you don't need a perfect mental balance. God loves us each just as we are.

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