

No Body or Mind Left Behind – Part 2

Psalm 42

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The title of this two-part sermon is “no body or mind left behind.” Last week we looked at physical disabilities and differing abilities, and we explored what we could do to be good friends and change the culture around us to be more accessible and inclusive. This week we will be talking about mental illness and chronic pain. What do we do when our friend’s illness is invisible and at times so debilitating that they can’t even talk about it? Or if they are afraid of being judged because of the stigma around mental illness?

In the Scripture reading that we heard this morning, the psalmist is pouring out their heart to God in deep anguish. It is an appeal to God for rescue, a Psalm of Lament. I pick up on many different themes in this psalm: first of all, a sense of abandonment, rejection, isolation, and deep grief. I also hear what sounds like depression or sadness and possibly anxiety. There's also a sense of oppression and persecution, and an overall a sense of despair, spiritual desolation, and separation from God.

When I was preparing to write this sermon and looking for appropriate Scriptures or Biblical characters to learn from, there was no shortage of instances of people expressing deep emotional pain. Although I settled on Psalm 42, there is a whole category of Psalms of Lament, about forty-two of them, that are full of anguish and despair. I could have also used the book of Lamentations, a collection of laments with a bleak outlook speaking of a sense of abandonment or rejection by God. And then there’s Ecclesiastes, “Perfectly pointless, says the Teacher, perfectly pointless. Everything is pointless.” There’s also the laments of the prophets, especially Jeremiah, known as the Weeping prophet. I could have used the example of Elijah, who went on a day’s journey into the wilderness, found a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. And then of course there’s the great suffering of Job. And most importantly there’s Jesus, the Son of God, who in the garden of Gethsemane admitted “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Although there’s an abundance of Biblical characters who suffered from anguish and despair, somehow in some Christian circles talking about depression or struggles with mental illness can be a taboo topic or seen as something within the individual's ability to control. Emotional pain or mental illness just needs to be prayed away, you know, ask God for healing and have faith and you’ll be fine. And if your prayers are not answered then obviously this indicates a lack of faith on your part. Sometimes the mental illness or lack of healing may be seen as a sign of God’s judgment or punishment. What did you do to anger or disappoint God?

There are fundamental questions that people have been asking since time immemorial around suffering: Why does God allow suffering? Why doesn’t God heal those who are suffering? These questions fall under what theologians call “theodicy” which is the religious response to the problem of suffering, and evil. At the root of the question however, is the image one has of God.

Is God omnipotent or all powerful, omniscient or all-knowing, and omnipresent or everywhere? Is God a Father figure who blesses or curses his children depending on how they behave or how he feels? This tends to be the Old Testament image of God. Going along with this image, the belief would then be that God blesses us if we act right, and a measure of our faith would be how happy, healthy, and prosperous we are. What does this then mean to those suffering from mental illnesses and chronic pain?

I'm not going to go into too much detail as to the possible physiological and psychological causes of depression and mental illnesses, of which there are many, but I will say that the individuals who suffer have very little control over this (on their own), and I know some deeply faithful, God-loving people who suffer in this way.

Our friends who suffer from depression struggle with feelings of sadness, emptiness or hopelessness that they are unable to lift themselves out of. They may also struggle with feelings of worthlessness or guilt, especially if they are not able to perform at work or within the family the way that they would want to. Often they fixate on their failures and blame themselves for their predicament.

Our friends who suffer from anxiety feel nervous, restless or tense, with no apparent or real cause or threat. They have trouble concentrating or thinking about anything other than the present worry. They wrestle with a sense of impending danger, panic or doom, from which they can't escape and no one around them can help.

Our friends who suffer from chronic pain and fatigue caused by: fibromyalgia, arthritis, autoimmune diseases, back issues, and other conditions, also tend to suffer quietly. We can't see or understand the cause of their pain because often it is not externally visible, like a broken limb is for instance, but they suffer greatly.

On top of their suffering due to their condition, very often our friends are wrestling with a sense of shame for their condition. In last week's sermon, I shared that as a culture we tend to value people by what they can do or produce, or how they perform. This applies to those suffering from mental illnesses too. The stigma and sense of shame is not because of God. It is because of us.

Last Wednesday when I was recording the first sermon in this series, Adele Roy shared with me the breaking news of the gymnast Simone Biles withdrawing from the Olympics for mental health reasons. A New York Times article shared how Biles, "began "fighting all of those demons" and couldn't hold them back. She was not mentally prepared to continue. She said later that she was not certain she would compete again at the Tokyo Games. Biles said after the competition that she had hoped to compete for herself, but "felt like I was still doing it for other people." She added, "So that just, like, hurts my heart, because doing what I love has been kind of taken away from me to please other people. Biles said she came to the Olympics "feeling pretty good," yet was dealing with some issues that grew tougher by the day. Therapy and medications

usually work, she explained, but even then high stress situations can cause her to “really freak out” because she doesn’t know how to handle the battery of emotions.”

The backlash that Biles faced after this decision was just mean and ugly for someone already suffering so greatly.

Where is God in the face of those suffering from mental illnesses and chronic pain? There are other images of God beyond that of God as an All-Powerful Paternal figure. There’s the loving paternal image as the Abba Father of Jesus found in the New Testament who Jesus cried out to for help.

There are maternal images of God such as Sophia: Woman Wisdom from Proverbs; there’s God as a protective Mother eagle in Deuteronomy 32: “Like the eagle that stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young, God spreads her wings to catch you, and carries you on pinions.”; God as a comforting mother in Isaiah 66:13: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” and many other feminine images.

There’s the Creator God of nature where one can experience God through beauty and the senses. There’s also God as the Liberator Figure or God of the Oppressed of Black/Latinx liberation theology who brings justice and redemption. And there are others. Which image would bring the most comfort to our friend who is struggling?

But I have to ask: Is God an object? Or is God a subject? A noun or a verb?

I believe there’s also God as the energy of love and connection that we experience in community. Jesus in his state of anguish and despair in the Garden of Gethsemane asked his friends to “stay here and keep watch with me.

I just love The Center for Action and Contemplation and Father Richard Rohr’s daily meditations and in last Sunday’s meditation, Rohr wrote that: “In Jesus, God comes along to show us: “Even I suffer. Even I participate in the finiteness of this world.”After two thousand years, Jesus is still a revolutionary symbol, revelation, and reality. He turned theology upside down and taught, in effect: God is not who you think God is. The enfleshment and suffering of Jesus reveals that God is not apart from the trials of humanity. God is not aloof. God is not a spectator. God is not merely tolerating human suffering or instantly just healing it. God is participating with us in it. Living it alongside us and with us. That is what gives us eternal purpose and hope.”

As a community of faith and friends, what can we do to support our friends who are suffering? Our church, through Amy Kennedy, recently formed a relationship with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) so that we can better care for our people as well as do what we can to support NAMI as it supports others. If you have any questions about congregational care and spiritual support, please feel free to contact Amy Kennedy. She will be happy to chat with you and see how we can help.

Going back to the feelings of shame, separation, abandonment and rejection that people with mental illnesses wrestle with. How do we help with that? Jesus asked his community of friends to stay here and keep watch with me.

In therapy terminology there's something called "Holding space" meaning being physically, mentally, and emotionally present for our friend. It means supporting them as they feel their feelings and share them without trying to fix them or give advice.

When we pray for them, we pray that they are able to sense God's presence in whatever way that works best for them, and that they know that they have not been forsaken and that they are deeply loved. We have no idea exactly how God is working in their situation, but we absolutely know that our Living God is with them in the midst of their suffering, and also still very much within them as they were created in the image and likeness of God. Our presence could break that sense of separation from the community and God. It very well could be a manifestation of God's love.

Stay here and keep watch with me.
No mind left behind.

Amen!