

Urgent and Hopeful Sermon on Mental Health

Scripture: Genesis 4:1-9

Here's a Friday afternoon headline that popped up on my I-Phone and I quote: "Is Generation Z sad? Maybe – but they're optimistic, too, and maybe more open about mental struggles." (USA Today) End quote. That's a lot in 16 words: sad, optimistic, open, and mental struggles, describing today's young people.

We're in a conflicted age, at every turn. I think it was The Wall Street Journal and the NY Times that both said, the economy is getting better, but nobody wants to hear it! It seems like we've reached the point where we don't want good news to get in the way of the bad news.

Did you know the New York Jets football team WON their opening game? Yes, it's true, their star quarterback tore his Achilles heel in the opening minutes, and that will impact the whole season, but they did actually win their game! But if you read the sports pages that week or listened to sports radio nobody wanted to talk about the win! The bad news dominated. Maybe that's long been the human dilemma, forever caught between being too up or too down; too positive, or too negative; too hopeful, or too pessimistic. "The world is going to hell in a handbasket" is certainly one popular view of the state of the world. Or, we are getting better, incrementally at least, step by step, not fast enough for many, but still in the right direction – that's the view of the optimist.

President Obama proclaimed, "the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice," quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., who was quoting an 1850's Boston pastor. And I believe that saying. After all, I am a professional positive person since my work is entirely devoted to "The Good News." That's what Christian words like Gospel, Evangel, evangelism, and Godspell mean, they all refer to "Good News." We are the Good News people! That's our product, our approach to life, our worldview. I've often preached that our worldview is a choice. You and I choose

every day how we will look at the world, how we will face every challenge. Optimistically, or pessimistically. Positively, or negatively. Do we view things through the lens of the Good News; or through the lens of “woe is me?” I tend to think the world is getting better. Until I wake up one morning to see a picture of Russia’s Putin and North Korea’s Kim grinning and shaking hands, as they plot to obliterate anybody in their path. But, other than that, I see progress!

Today, I bring that hopeful thought to the world of mental health, a top priority ministry of our church. With the launching of our “SHALOM” ministry a year ago we were making a statement, that mental health and all its attendant concerns, are front-burner issues for our church. Our 300th Anniversary campaign makes the same declaration, that “we are here for the long term,” that’s why we’re fixing what we can fix, strengthening what we can strengthen, saving what we can save. We are focused. And the same with our mental health ministry. My guess is that mental health crises have been around forever.

One of the earliest stories in the Bible, our troubling scripture lesson for today, is about Cain killing his brother Abel, in a jealous fit of rage. They were Adam and Eve’s children, only the 2nd generation of humans, when the whole world was brand new. From creation to theology, everything was still being figured out, imperfectly. Adam and Eve get kicked out of Eden for eating the wrong fruit. Cain killed Abel after making the wrong offering. Like I said, this was early in every aspect of human development, including our relationships with God. There were no churches back then, no Holy books or clergy to guide them, everybody was just figuring things out for themselves. According to the Bible, at some point Cain and Abel were both doing good, and both figured out, somehow, that they ought to thank God.

Cain was a farmer, growing food, and Abel was a herdsman with sheep, cattle, goats, like that. So, Cain gave God an offering of fruit and Able gave God some prime cuts of meat. Mysteriously, God was not pleased with Cain, and the Bible reports that “Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.” Angry, and downcast. Depressive, and in need of anger management. God tells Cain to fix his

attitude, but instead he goes out and kills his brother. What have we got here? We've got anger, depression, and violence, in one little story, and we're barely 20 years into the history of humanity! I'm not being flip here at all. I'm actually trying to be optimistic, showing the "arc of the universe bending" in a positive, helpful direction.

In mental health we are finally naming and treating and progressing with behaviors that have been around forever. There's even a Bible verse that says, "God will strike you with madness" (Deuteronomy 28:28). Now, we may not believe that God gives us mental illness, I certainly don't believe that, but the verse is simply a recognition of the reality that there are people hurting in ways that aren't always visible, reasonable, reachable, understandable. It's not like putting a cast on a broken wrist, or stitches on a cut. The Bible is evolutionary, it grows in its learning and explaining and dealing. Here's a fascinating example. When Israel entered the Promised Land there were already people living there, gathered in cities and tribes and kingdoms. One by one, Israel goes to war against them, beginning, they believe, with God's demand that they kill every man, woman, child, elderly, and animals. As time goes on, those horrific demands get lessened, softened, until eventually there's room for diplomacy; and even for allowing people who don't want to fight not to fight. In a generation they go from mass slaughter to conscientious objection, an evolution in the understanding of war, ethics, politics, governance, conscience.

That's what's going on in the world of mental health right now. As a society, as people and families and church, we are evolving. We moved from fear to comparison, from punishment to healing. The Bible deals with a lot more mental health issues than Cain killing Abel in a jealous hissy fit, with his depressive downcast face and his aggressive anger. Some Biblical examples are more obvious than others; some you must read between the lines; some become clear in light of modern advances in therapy and diagnosis.

There's the great prophet Elijah who was so depressed he thought of suicide. Judas' guilt complex led him to suicide. Traumas and Post Traumatic

Stress Disorders are throughout the Bible. What must Noah's flood, Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction, 400 years of Israel's slavery in Egypt, the "Slaughter of the Innocents" after Jesus' birth, have done to the mental health of thousands and thousands of people?? There is intense loneliness in the Bible, there's unbridled grief. King Saul was clearly manic depressive. In addition, our Bible is full of stories about visions, dreams, voices, angels, demons, witchcraft, sorcery; and a whole range of excesses that nowadays would have a name, a diagnosis, and a treatment. In Biblical times, all people knew was that so and so was "unusual," a bit odd, not quite right, someone to be watched, feared, isolated, persecuted, even killed.

The short story I wrote about "Legion," the one that's in the Narthex if you want to read it, is a good example. Legion got the name because he was filled with demons. As such, his behavior was erratic, odd, scarily different. So, he was ostracized, made to live in a cave outside of town, chained to a wall, until Jesus came along, treated him like a friend, healed him mind, body, and spirit. I've seen it in my own lifetime, visiting in various institutions, people kept behind bars, in shackles. I'm not talking about the criminally insane or the verifiable dangerous. I'm talking about people, with problems, that society didn't know how to deal with. In our lifetime, and even more so in recent years, we've progressed immensely. There's been less fear and more concern. There's less stigma, and more help.

May I make a parallel with cancer? When I was a young pastor people wouldn't even use the word. If someone in church was diagnosed, one person might say to another, "did you hear? Mrs. Smith has..." and then they'd lower their voice to a whisper, "Mrs. Smith has ... the 'C' word." The C word. Twice in my early career I was hauled before the Deacons for using offensive language. On one occasion I had prayed for the "pregnant" women in our church. On the next occasion, I asked prayers for a person with "breast cancer." Imagine! – the words "pregnant," "breast," and "cancer," all spoken from the pulpit. But that was the stigma of the day.

The stigma of our day has been mental illness. People may be hesitant to be very open or public about mental health struggles. Do we want a potential employer to know? Or college? Or boyfriend or girlfriend? Or family friend or co-worker? For most of my life we'd all say "no!!" Even two years ago, I'd have said "no!!" But that's changing. Maybe not fast enough, maybe not far enough, but it's changing. Awareness. Openness. Comparison. All on the upswing. In Alida's youth ministry, many young people talk about their mental health journey openly, publicly. Stigma. Exclusion. Isolation. Little by little, on the downswing. There's a part of the "Cain and Abel" murder story that gets short shrift, in large part because it is uncomfortable and demanding. After Cain kills his brother, God, in his unique way of investigation, sort of like the old, bedraggled, unkempt cop, Columbo, God says to Cain, "uh, hey! Where's your brother?" And Cain infamously says snidely, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

According to the Jewish calendar, and our Jewish family and friends have just celebrated the New Year, Year 5784, so this story is about 5760 years ago. All those years, all over the world, in every age and culture and society, that question still reverberates: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Which begs another dozen questions that we can't get to today like "Who's my brother?" and what does it mean to be their "keeper?" That question has stymied the world for 5760 years, and still does. But in the world of mental health, in this little church, in our little shalom ministry, in ways large and small, across the full spectrum of issues, crises and struggles, I see a movement of brother and sister keepers. In my struggles I know people who will try to look after me. In your struggles, I know people who would try to look after you. That's progress. That's good news.

In closing, I'm adding something I want to say even if I'm not sure, yet, how to say it well. May I again use a cancer analogy? In the world of cancer there is an active debate that too many people are being diagnosed with cancer. If I follow the debate accurately, it's something like this. Too many are diagnosed with cancer. Too many with cancer are freaking out. Not all cancer needs us to freak out. So maybe we shouldn't call all cancers are cancer. Even though scientifically, medically they are cancer. But let's not tell you, or least not tell a lot of you. I

don't know about that, but I understand the premise. We are not always able to keep a check on our response, our emotions, our psyche. I've actually been in the room when a doctor tells a church member they have cancer, and you can see it clearly, the patient shuts down entirely. The doctor goes on to say it's entirely treatable, very likely curable, little to worry about. But no one hears that...they are stuck on cancer. Likewise in the world of mental health. Everything has a diagnosis. Some are absolutely specific. Some are on a broad spectrum, or under a big umbrella. Everyone, it can seem, is depressed or anxious or bipolar or narcissistic or ADHD or passive aggressive. And they all are coming with the headline "Mental Illness." And when we hear that about ourselves, or our loved ones, we can "freak out," we can shut down, we can get stuck on the word, the stigma, the fear.

But Faith, in general, and church, in particular, and our SHALOM ministry, we are here for hope, for perspective, to see beyond the words that otherwise freeze us. I mentioned earlier the prophet Elijah, God's servant for whom life became overwhelming, too much. So, one day, he lays down to die. Refused to eat. Depressed. Suicidal. But faith wouldn't leave him there. An angel prodded him forward, leading to an encounter with God on a mountainside. He saw the destructive power of wind and fire and earthquake. But God, he learned, was not the turmoil, not the destruction, and not the storm. God was in, what the Bible calls "the still small voice." God was in the peace, the quiet, the beauty, the simple things that make delight in each day.

In our humble ministry in this little old church on top of a gently sloping hill, we try to be a place for that peace, that beauty, that Godly "still small voice," always the voice of hope.

Closing Hymn 566
"Be Still, My Soul"