

This week we heard of two prominent people who committed suicide. Two people who seemed to be at the peak of very successful careers. And CDC issued a report showing that between 1999 and 2006 the national suicide rate jumped by 30%, making suicide the 10th leading cause of death. So this morning I think we should spend some time thinking together about suicide.

According to the CDC report the problems most frequently associated with suicide, are strained relationships; life stressors, often involving work or finances; substance use problems; physical health conditions; and recent or impending crises. Only half the people who took their own lives had been diagnosed with mental illness. So we can't slough this off as something which only happens when people are seriously depressed or mentally ill. People are increasingly seeing suicide as a solution to intolerable mental and emotional pain.

And it is contagious. In the four months following Robin Williams' death in 2014 suicide rates increased by almost 10% especially among middle-aged men.¹ Of course you don't catch suicide like a virus, but whenever someone steps across normal social boundaries they make it easier for others to do so. Sometimes this is positive thing, like coming out for gay people, but it seems that more often it is a negative action like high school shootings or suicide. Highly publicized suicides like those this week can encourage people who have suicidal thoughts to move forward and develop a plan, and even to take action.

Suicide rarely comes completely out of the blue; it is usually the result of a period of significant despair, but it may be a complete surprise to family and friends. Most people who suicide do not want to die, they just want the pain to stop.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/09/health/suicide-contagion-explainer/index.html>

When I tried to commit suicide in my early 20s I really had no comprehension that more than one or two people would be particularly upset. I had reached such a point of isolation and disconnection that I thought the world would be a better place without me in it. And yes people had suggested I go to the college counseling center, but I was too proud or too negative. I couldn't imagine how they could help.

So the most important work of suicide prevention is to build warm and loving relationships whenever we can. As humans we need to feel connected in a matrix of relationship and for those of us who are called to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, this is urgent and important work. We have no idea how our words and our actions affect those around us. We have no idea what is really going on inside another person but when we intentionally seek and serve the Christ in others, when we hold all we meet in high positive regard we are building relationship and we are building community.

All of us have negative feelings. Sometimes they cause us to isolate. I have had people tell me that they can't come to church because they are too miserable. They are afraid that they will cry, or they just can't bear to have people ask them how they are. As a culture we tend to expect one another to be upbeat or at least positive. When we ask "How are you doing?" we usually expect at least a moderately cheerful answer. While there's a lot to be said for cheeriness, it can be a mask which gets in the way of deeper connection. All of us suffer and no-one should be alone in their suffering. We have psalms of praise and joy but there's a reason we also have psalms of lament and despair. Terrible things happen. Suffering happens.

As we each take responsibility for our own mental health, sharing suffering is important. It's ok for you to cry in church. It's ok to tell other people what you're going through. It's ok to ask for prayer. Yes

we gather each week to praise and worship God and joy is an important part of our life together but so is weeping. When we feel that we have to stay positive and don't allow ourselves to share the pain and the difficulty then, in our pride, we are not allowing others to share their love.

Since at least the 5th century, the church has seen suicide as a sin from which one cannot repent. In today's gospel reading, Jesus was clearly talking about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in response to the accusation that he was in cahoots with Beelzebul, but suicide has been seen like blasphemy against the Holy Spirit - a sin with no hope of redemption. By the 16th century those who committed suicide were buried in unhallowed ground and soon attempted suicide was seen as a sin which could lead to excommunication. Although attitudes have moderated considerably since then, it is still seen as a sin with the Catholic catechism stating, *It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.*²

Fortunately God's love is unconditional and reaches beyond the grave so there is plenty of love and forgiveness for those whose anguish is such that they take their own lives, as well as for those around them who are left not only with the sorrow of sudden loss but also the burden of guilt. Suicide is such an extreme rejection of life and connection that when one close to us dies we cannot help but feel that we should or could have done something more. God gently holds us as we work out the complex emotions and pain.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_views_on_suicide

I imagine that all of our lives have been touched in greater or lesser ways by suicide, and while we can talk about suicide prevention in the intentional creation of connections and of community; and while we can learn more about effective interventions in time of crisis, we need to have a bigger picture within which to place our experience.

So we return to the Biblical witness that our God is one of love. The message of Jesus is that we do not need to fear the angry, vindictive God of our imaginations but can rest assured that we are infinitely precious, infinitely loved. So God's heart grieves with our suffering. God stands in solidarity with those who are suffering just as she dances with those who are rejoicing. God does not punish those whose despair leads them to take their own lives. And God does not punish those who witness their death. God stands gently with us in our grief.

Our God is a God of hope. As we heard in the second reading today, even though our bodies may be letting us down, even though we are suffering we know that this too will pass. We know that all we experience in this earthly life is temporary and our hope is in the God who makes the permanent yet unseen world. In that world we experience glory beyond measure.

We also know that our God brings resurrection. There will be healing. There will again be joy. Psalm 30 says "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." Healing also happens after death. The despair of suicide is turned to the joy of the presence of God. For those of us who live in this plane, weeping may tarry for many, many nights but as we turn to God, joy will always come one morning. We serve a living God who longs for each of us to know the joy of our own true nature, for each of us to be filled with the abundant life that comes from walking with God.

And as we each turn again and again to God and deepen our own knowledge and confidence in God's ever abiding love so we will be able to greet the suffering in our own lives with peace and equanimity, and minister to those who are in despair.

Let us pray

Bless, O God of eternal life,
all who have died
by their own hand.
Grant them peace
from their inner turmoil
and the compassion of your love.

Comfort those who mourn
their loved ones.

Strengthen them to face the questions of pain,
the guilt and anger,
the irreparable loss.

Help us to reach out in love
to others who prefer death
to the choices of life
and to their families who grieve.

Amen.

<http://www.beliefnet.com/prayers/christian/death/prayer-for-those-who-have-committed-suicide.aspx#yy2uruVEDxE3uuFi.99>