

A Sermon for Mental Health Sunday – Mark 10:35-35

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on October 16, 2021

“Mommy, Daddy’s crazy.” I don’t remember saying those words when I was very little, but my mother tells this story as an example of my father’s decline into mental illness. We were in the car. Dad was driving and talking about becoming President of the United States. I piped up from the back seat while Mom cried. There’s a lot of stories that follow that moment. Dad ended up dissociating from reality almost completely. He self-medicated with alcohol and ultimately became homeless and died when he was 50. Mom and her brothers were able to relocate her and the five of us kids to safety. In the years that followed, my mother gave us a gift by telling us that, “Dad was sick,” while also reminding us that he was brilliant and loving before his illness took over. Back in that day, there was little that could help him get better even if he was able to commit to treatment. Mom also gave us the gift of knowing that counselors could help us. We went to family counseling once things stabilized a bit and she regularly encouraged us to get help when things don’t feel right – something my siblings and I have done over time to look in the rearview mirror on Dad’s and our experiences.

Fast-forwarding 40 years, our niece encountered similar but different struggles with mental illness. Fortunately, my sister’s a doctor and she found experimental treatment at a research university that was able to help. We believe that the treatment saved my niece’s life, and we hope and pray that that research launches healing treatment for many. I called her the other day to ask her if I could share her story in the sermon. To which she gave an excited, “Yes!” We talked about how she’s doing. Her still daily challenges with mental illness – although it’s way better that it was. And her upcoming wedding in November. There’s a lot to celebrate after those scary times even if the healing is incomplete. And she’s grateful that our church is talking openly about mental illness. She “wants people to know that more people struggle with mental illness than we know, battling with their minds on a daily basis.” And that, “It’s an invisible illness needing more community education.”

Untreated mental illness, and the suffering of the one who’s sick and those who love them, creates panic. And panic doesn’t help us think well. We often ask the wrong questions. Not unlike James and John who panicked when Jesus talked

about his upcoming death sentence as the Son of Man being mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed.<sup>1</sup> (This happens in the verses in Mark just before the ones we read today.) James and John's response is out of touch with what Jesus just said but the panic is understandable. They asked to be at Jesus' right and left hand in his glory. Jesus didn't say no. He just told them that they don't know what they're asking. Spoiler alert: At the end of Mark's gospel, Jesus is crucified with a bandit on his right and a bandit on his left.<sup>2</sup> James and John, confronted with Jesus' Son of Man claim of impending death, think that the solution is power over the situation. They're living in a time of chaos – Rome's military is executing revolutionaries, there's a civil war in Judea killing hundreds of thousands, and Jerusalem is being destroyed along with the temple.<sup>3</sup> Suffering is everywhere. Jesus reminds James and John that the response to suffering isn't more power and tyranny. The response to suffering is to serve. This is the same verb in Greek when the angels serve Jesus in the wilderness and when Simon Peter's mother-in-law serves after she is healed.<sup>4</sup> The doctor who came up with our niece's treatment was similarly a servant. God rest his soul.

Corporations can also be such a servant. The Indianapolis Colts' "Kicking the Stigma" campaign is one example.<sup>5</sup> During NFL games, the Colts' ads feature players and owners talking about mental illness. Linebacker Darius Leonard, wearing a t-shirt that says, "It's okay to not be okay," while he talks about his own mental illness is powerful.

In 2012, our denomination – the ELCA – published a social message called "The Body of Christ and Mental Illness."<sup>6</sup> Social messages are published after a lengthy process of study, reflection, critique, rewrites, and discussions with many people. The messages are informed by scripture, tradition, science, and experience. The one about mental illness encourage actions that can be taken by and with people who are mentally ill. One of my favorite parts of the social message is the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:32-34 – These are the verses just before James and John ask to be at his left and right hand.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 15:27

<sup>3</sup> Matthew L. Skinner, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Sermon Brainwave Podcast on Mark 10:35-45 for preaching October 17, 2021. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/806-21st-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-29b-oct-17-2021>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Karoline Lewis, Professor of Homiletics and Preaching, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.colts.com/community/kicking-the-stigma>. There's a lot to critique about the National Football League but this one falls in plus column.

<sup>6</sup> [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Mental\\_IllnessSM.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Mental_IllnessSM.pdf)

research that mental illness often has genetic and biological causes at their root, while “many still believe sufferers just need to ‘think positive’ or work harder to ‘snap out of it’ when what they really need is treatment, therapy, and support.”<sup>7</sup> Here at Augustana, our Faith Community Nurse Sue Ann and the Health Ministry Team has started the E4 ministry to Enlighten, Encourage, Educate, and Empower individuals and families about mental health in a faith community. If you or anyone you work or live with has mental illness or symptoms of mental illness, please consider attending Augustana’s E4 meetings on the second Thursday of each month.

It’s tempting to think that people like my dad, with his Ph.D. in Leadership, could have used those smarts to outsmart mental illness. It just doesn’t work that way. If he could have healed himself, he would have. As a child, it took some time for me to talk about the trauma. And as an adult, it’s taken some time to heal from that trauma and find helpful ways to talk about suffering especially when there is really no explanation for it. My mother’s gift to us in both naming his mental illness and making it an acceptable topic of conversation gave us a way forward without shame.

Jesus exposes shame for the lie that it is from his humiliation on the cross. Shame is a lie that isolates and destroys us as individuals by separating us from community when connection and community are the very things we need the most to counter shame. In our Gathering Song, we sang:

Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you,  
pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.  
I will hold the Christ light for you, in the nighttime of your fear.  
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.<sup>8</sup>

In that spirit, you may choose to come forward while we’re singing our next song if you would like to light a candle in prayer for someone with mental illness and their family or for yourself. We’ll hold the Christ-light for each other as we sing and pray.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., *The Body of Christ and Mental Illness*, page 17.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Gellard. The Servant Song. Text and music © 1977 Scripture in Song/ASCAP