

Planting Hope in Our Mental and Emotional Wellbeing

Matthew 25:34-40

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Recently I asked our staff to write what they were each feeling during our weekly chapel and here are some of the responses: Good; energized; less grounded; frustrated; rushed, missing out; optimistic; excited; supported; busy; hopeful; solid, absorbing; anxious; sad. None of these or any emotion is right or wrong, good or bad...they just are, sometimes difficult, sometimes easy...but all are important to our mental health.

Because of the ongoing pandemic, racial injustice and inequity, climate crisis producing more natural disasters, political division, and all the loss we've experienced, we need to be aware of how the stress of it all is affecting our mental health, which is our emotional and mental wellbeing. Our world has felt more fear, anxiety, and grief in the last two years than we may have ever felt collectively...or maybe we are more aware of it now than ever. It's good to be aware, but it's also important to surround one another with support and continue to find ways to plant hope during the difficulty.

Several weeks ago, even as I was preparing this message about planting hope in our mental health, I reached out to several trusted friends and family to say, "I am feeling weary and down today." Like my grandmother used to say, "I just feel 'blue' today." I just didn't have a lot of motivation. But by reaching out and being heard, validated, and understood by those I trusted, something shifted within me. They didn't try to fix me or give me advice; they listened and understood. I was able to take one step, then another, then another, doing small tasks until I was able to function more productively.

But there have been other times in my life when I needed more support than simply reaching out to good friends. Sometimes we have mental health issues where we need medical intervention. God meets us there, too. And we, as the church, can support and bless those who are trained mental health

professionals, as well as walk alongside each other in ways Jesus demonstrated through scripture. Let's look at one of the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 25:34-40:

³⁴⁻³⁶ *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why:*

*I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.'*

³⁷⁻⁴⁰ *"Then those 'sheep' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'" — The Message Bible*

Jesus reached out to heal those who were stigmatized and marginalized as are many with mental health issues today. We are called and empowered to join JESUS in that work; not in the way the therapists and doctors are trained to diagnose and treat, but by allowing the Holy Spirit to work in and through us to be present with all people, including ourselves, in difficult times.

We all experience some type of mental health difficulty at some time in our lives, whether it is in a relationship with someone we love or within ourselves.

So, let's read this passage again, with yourself in mind first, then thinking of others; in terms of doing what you can to keep yourself mentally healthy as well as caring for others, as a way of ministering to Jesus.

*"I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.*

"...I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me."

Caring for self and others both physically and mentally is the invitation of this scripture. This does not mean

that you are more important than anyone else, but if I do not care for myself, I might not even be healthy enough to be present to plant hope in this world. Caring for others to the point where you do not care for yourself can lead you to some unhealthy patterns.

Let's be aware of our own times of hunger. When have you experienced physical hunger? And when have you felt an emotional hungry for love, acceptance, compassion and given that to yourself, without judgement? Our hunger is a signal to our body of our need.

Or have you sought to "feed" someone else who was "hungry" first hoping you would be fed by feeding another...so that it was more for you to feel better than to help another?

Have you tried to keep yourself hydrated so that you didn't get dehydrated, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally? When you were thirsty in any of these ways did you give yourself something that would make you more thirsty? Think of it when we realize we are thirsty, we get water. Your thirst is a signal to your body of your need.

When were you without something that met your needs to be warm, clothed...not living in shame? Did you seek that someone else take care of you, or take care of yourself? Your shivering was a signal to your body of your need.

When were you sick and stop to rest and be still so that healing would be more possible? Your sickness was a signal to your body of your need.

When have you felt imprisoned by a situation, and brought a loving presence of yourself, allowing God to visit you in that way? Imprisonment, whether literally or symbolically is a signal to your body of your need. When you do this to the least (ourselves and others), Jesus said we've done it unto him. Because Jesus is the embodiment of God, our Creator, when we care for all God's creation in ourselves and others, it's caring for God.

When we care for ourselves, we are much healthier, better able to give out of an overflow of our own health.

For example: For years I thought this scripture was all about serving others, without taking time to care for my own needs. I was at church every time the doors were opened; I said yes to serve in all kinds of capacities, and I was always on the lookout for those who needed something. I felt good about myself when

I thought I was helping another. I wanted others to be happy. I failed to see how important all feelings are to our mental health, like embracing both joy and sadness.

I got really burned out on helping everyone because I wasn't allowing myself to be aware of my own feelings and needs, much less tend to those feelings without judging myself.

I bypassed my more difficult feelings. When those are passed by, they surface eventually in a way that feels overwhelming. When I was getting my Master of Divinity in Pastoral Care and Counseling, I was advised that if I wanted to be the best of therapists, I would need to be in therapy for myself. This was the best advice I've ever received, and it is a practice I continue to this day.

Mental health professionals are trained and gifted to help diagnose and treat us when we may desire to care for our mental health or have a mental health crisis. This is one of the best ways to care for yourself, which then ripples into healthy patterns in your relationships. It is a spiritual practice.

Richard Rohr says, "All great spirituality is about what we do with our pain. If we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it to those around us."

Let me say that a bit different. If we are not present to our past pain with love and compassion, without judgement, we will continue to transmit that unhealed pain within and around us. This is a practice, not something we do once and are done...it's our spiritual practice.

I want to invite us now to prayerfully listen to this song by Spencer LaJoye. The words of her prayer include all the places we find ourselves with our varied feelings and experiences and that God will hear us...may we listen and pray with her and be broken open to feel and share hope in our listening and hearing.

(Video of "A Plowshare Prayer" - <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=108817264611296>)

I was captivated by the words of that song because of all the feelings and situations she acknowledges for all of us. She prays that all are heard and that we honor what we are feeling and in hearing one another there is healing. This is prayer inclusive of all people and a beautiful expression of planting hope in caring for our mental health.

So, how can we plant hope for the health of the mental and emotional wellbeing in our world? So

many people are experiencing a mental health crisis. People who seem to “have it altogether” are living with pain so great that they have no hope and choose to end their lives. This affects us all deeply.

We wonder, what can we do, how is God calling us to plant hope, in addition to taking care of our own mental health?

I’d like to share about a time I learned a bit about this from a wise supervisor. I was serving as a student chaplain at a state psychiatric hospital while in seminary. I was assigned to the geriatric unit. I was so moved by all of their lives and learned more lessons than I have time to share today. But there was this one lady who was so angry about everything. I decided to try to spend time with her and asked her questions about herself so she would know I cared about her...all to help her feel better, I thought. As I asked about her life, I was met not with delight in her telling me about her life, but intense anger as she stood up, looked me up and down, and just had all kinds of words for me, some of which I had never heard. I was so upset about this interaction that I talked with my supervisor about the experience. He said, “Jody, I want you to try something...next time you see her sitting alone, ask her permission to sit with her. If she says yes, then you sit and don’t... say... another ...word.” “What? Well, how can I help her?” He said, “Just try it and see what happens.”

So, I did, and I could not believe what happened. She began to talk and share. Her words and sentences made total sense, whereas before she seemed confused, and nothing made sense. When I shared the results with my supervisor, he just smiled his wise old smile and said, “Yes, your questions were too fast and too much for her to process. Once she didn’t feel the pressure, she wasn’t so anxious from your anxious presence of trying to help and fix her.” I have never forgotten that lesson of having the ministry of non-anxious presence.

I think we can all relate to the uncomfortable feeling of being the object of someone who is trying to fix or advise us when we haven’t asked for advice. In relation to Jesus’ words from Matthew to give food and water, visit the sick and imprisoned...those are more than just checking the box of meeting those needs...they are ways to not only meet physical needs but also needs of the soul.

For example, how can we listen to what someone is not able to say and truly be present? How can we feed

someone who is hungry to be heard...by asking caring questions and listening without thinking of what we need to say in response?

Here’s a wonderful graphic that helps me remember how to be present through empathic listening instead of dismissive listening [<https://pin.it/jrux4jE>].

Lamentations 3:19-24 gives us words that validate mental health issues as well as offer hope.

¹⁹ *The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words.*

²⁰ *I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss.*

²¹ *Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this:*

²² *The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease.*

²³ *Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.*

²⁴ *I say to myself, “The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!”*

When we meet self and others with validation of our experience, and compassion of God’s Word and love, then we know “thy kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.”

We often want to bypass uncomfortable feelings and experiences in our lives and in scripture. If we avoid hearing the difficulty, then we can’t be heard or validate another’s experience and be a community of hope for and with one another.

If you want to receive resources about caring for our mental health, text the word HEALTH to 270-330-8350.

So, we offer our hearts to the Lord and to those we know we can trust, and in doing so we are found, we are loved, we have life, we can breathe, we are healed and are free to be our true selves. Let’s sing these words together as prayerful as we know how.