

Mental Health Sunday and the Church Getting Out of God's Way

John 13:31-35 and Acts 11:1-18

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on May 15, 2022

It's good to see that Peter is still getting into trouble after Jesus' resurrection. Although it's more accurate to say about this story in Acts that Peter had progressed to getting into good trouble, a bit different than his bumbling ways when Jesus was alive. Peter's friends in Jerusalem called him out for staying in a certain Roman centurion's home and eating there – a big no-no in Jewish circles at the time.¹ He told his friends about the vision he'd had from God, concluding his defense by asking his friends, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" The book of Acts tells the disciples' stories after Jesus' resurrection but it's arguable that Acts was written down before the Gospel stories were – the Gospels framing the theology that was already being practiced by the early church. What had not changed was Peter being at key dinner parties.

In the Gospel of John reading, Peter was at another meal, the meal that turned out to be Jesus' last meal. At that last supper, Jesus' command to love one another comes right after Judas' betrayal. Immediately before Jesus' commandment, Judas left the dinner party and his friends watched him go. The friends must have been confused to see Judas leave, only then to hear Jesus talking about loving each other without Judas there with them. They'd been together for three years through the wringer of ministry. Those friendships formed in a similar intensity to the ones we form at camp together where a lot happens in a short period of time. Watching Judas leave under the threat of his betrayal was inconceivable to the friends who had his back and then saw that back disappear through a doorway before dinner. The friends carried Judas' departure and death differently than Jesus' departure and death for sure, but they still carried it with them.

I wonder if Peter also had his old friend Judas in mind when he had dinner with his new friend Cornelius. After all, God wastes nothing from our experiences where the gospel is concerned. It's reasonable for Peter to remember Jesus'

¹ Acts 10

command to love one another in the aftermath of the resurrection and the early days of the church. How could he forget Jesus' command to love after Judas' betrayal when he dined with unexpected people in unexpected places at God's invitation only to hear accusations of betrayal from his Jerusalem friends. Except that it wasn't a betrayal. But we can label things a betrayal when events surprise us and when unexamined assumptions are shattered. The shock takes our breath away.

Shock fits with mental health and illnesses too. Mental illness is surprising, and it can feel like a betrayal of our own body when it happens to us or a betrayal by someone else when mental illness happens to someone we love. As if we ourselves or the people we love could choose whether or not our minds lose control. Or, even worse, to doubt our own or someone else's faith when minds succumb to mental illness, as if faith is protective of bad things happening. In our more rational moments, we know that faith doesn't protect us from bad things happening. We see faithful people near and far struggling with all kinds of things including mental illness. On Mental Health Sunday, it's a reminder we say out loud. Faith can certainly infuse us with courage and hope to think about mental illness differently. Faith also connects us with each other as church to do church differently. Much like Peter did with his friends in Jerusalem when he advocated for his new friend in Christ, Cornelius.

As a faith community, we can offer each other practical help. Yesterday, 24 Augustana people took First Aid Mental Health training through our E4 Ministry. 24 people gave time and energy, not only learning what to do in a mental health crisis but also learning about earlier warning signs. Their training makes visible the love that we have for each other at church, and it also sends trained people from Augustana into their families, neighborhoods, and workplaces. We talk, sing, pray, and learn a lot about God's love in the church. Being honest about mental health and illness and being prepared to intervene in a crisis is one way to take action in love. Although taking action can feel like betrayal to someone who is in a mental health crisis, taking action may mean the difference between life and death and giving someone a chance to heal.

Augustana's E4 Ministry itself is another way to take action. E4 is an ongoing effort to Enlighten, Encourage, Educate, and Empower each other. Get it? There are Four Es – Enlighten, Encourage, Educate, and Empower. E4 meets on second Thursdays of the month at 7 p.m. here at the church. People who have friends or family or coworkers who deal with mental health diagnoses and also people who know first-hand the challenges of having a mental diagnosis themselves are welcome to E4 conversations. This means that pretty much everyone has a place in E4.

Humility is a helpful correction when we talk about ministry of any kind. It'd be cool to be like Peter asking his friends, "Who am I to hinder God?" But we're often those friends in Jerusalem with a million questions about whether or not something will work or whether it's right or wrong or some other ministry-limiting question. So it's kind of cool that we get to be church together to occasionally break ministry loose from our questions and see what happens. The book of Acts is a bit different than the Gospel of John in this regard. The full name of the book is the Acts of the Apostles. But really, it's a book in which God's initiative is front and center and the church simply follows God along and lives into the new thing that God is doing.² When Peter asks his friends about not hindering God, God had already broken down barriers, destroyed what the friends thought of as permanent walls, and it was up to Peter and his friends to simply respond in kind.³

Too often, mental illness becomes a barrier to community and to being a part of the church. Practicing a resurrection ethic means figuring out how to love each other through our trials and challenges. The church, like humans everywhere, has a tough time loving each other as Jesus commands. Being church means it's going to be messy. Being church is also full of surprises because that's what it looks like when we follow a God who loves us first. Thanks be to God, and amen.

² Matt Skinner, Sermon Brainwave podcast for May 15, 2022. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/844-fifth-sunday-of-easter-c-may-15-2022>

³ Ibid.