

Mental Health Sunday [OR Preaching for the First Time About My Postpartum Depression] Luke 18:1-8 and Psalm 121

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on October 16, 2022

These past few days, morning walks with Rob and our dog Sunny have been glorious (poop bags not so much). Bluebird skies, wisps of white clouds, sunlight blooming off leaves turned red, orange, pink, and yellow, hills in the distance with hints of the brighter colors close by. During one of these walks, I mentioned how much better I feel when I've made the effort to get myself out of the door. The cool breeze lightens burdens and heavier thoughts, and at the same time makes space for lifting people to God in prayer. Times like these walks, when thoughts are clearer and life is calmer, foster so much of the gratitude that Pastor Ann talked about last week. Gratitude that changes perspective and improves mental health. Gratitude for things that aren't always seeable.

It's hard to describe the darkness of mental illness. My experience with postpartum depression gave me a glimpse of how dark and out of control it feels. Things were tough after our first was born but the depression went into overdrive after our second child. A mind hijacked by shame, I felt unworthy of love and the life I had. Everyone else seemed so happy as new parents and I was drowning in anger, losing my cool over the smallest things. Most of you wouldn't recognize the me that I was then. I was able to camouflage my distress except from those closest to me who felt hurt and helpless. Therapy and time and getting more sleep and my husband's determination and my eventual honesty about what I was going through and my apologies to the people who care about me and having a weekly reminder at worship of God's grace and unconditional love, all worked together towards healing. If there's one thing I've learned coming from generations of family who struggle with mental health, it's that healing from mental illness is never just one thing. Healing is layered. It took a few years to fully recover my light and my confidence and to trust that I was loved. I am most fortunate to have had the support and the resources to make it through that dark time. I do wonder what the outcome would have been if I'd hadn't had the support and resources.

Support and resources are part of what Mental Health Sunday is about. As we sang in our Gathering Song, we “build a house where love can dwell, and all can safely live.”¹ Part of the building this house is our honesty. Honesty that there are no quick fixes to mental illness. Honesty that our faith is a layer of healing – mental illness is NOT caused by lack of faith nor fixed by more faith as many of us were taught. And honesty that we need other people, some of whom are a congregation and some mental health professionals. Honesty that mental illness is a set of real diseases that are sometimes beyond our control to heal ourselves and sometimes beyond anyone’s control to heal completely. And honesty that our mental illnesses create pain for ourselves and the people we love. We start worship with a word of confession about ourselves and hear God’s good word of forgiveness because both are true – we are broken and do hurtful things out of our own pain AND God’s mercy endures forever. Today’s parable of the widow and the unjust judge is a great illustration of both.

“God is everything the unjust judge **is not**.”² This is not a parable that slides God into the power role. But God is present. The widow’s urgent persistence is fueled by God’s promises of justice, by God’s alignment with orphans and widows who are lifted up throughout scripture as worthy of the community’s energy, money, and protection. She has nothing to fear from the unjust judge because her life is on the line. Death is her outcome should her plea for justice fail. The widow is a good example of why the church has a role in advocating for justice of all kinds so that support and resources are broadly available. Today, that means spotlighting mental health and the factors that help and harm.

Our society is dealing with a tsunami of mental illness. Some of it, like my postpartum depression, is situational and familial. But the level of mental illness that we’re experiencing as a country is uncharted territory. This is no longer a discussion about a few individuals who struggle because of genetics and family systems. It is no longer a private health issue. Our culture destabilizes mental

¹ Evangelical Book of Worship (ELW), 641: All Are Welcome. Marty Haugen b. 1950, (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1994).

² Francisco J. Garcia, Ph.D. Candidate in Theological Studies, Ethics and Action, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Nashville, TN. Commentary on Luke 18:1-8 for Working Preacher. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-luke-181-8-5>

health to such an extent that it's become a public health issue. We're not going to fix this overnight but, like the persistent widow, we can persistently work on injustices in housing, healthcare, hunger, education, and employment because we know that these are factors that cause stress which can destabilize mental health. It's not about individuals working harder on self-care to cure themselves in an unjust society working against mental health. It's about our collective will, working together so that the more fragile among us have a shot at mental health through support, resources, and treatment. Even better would be a society less in need of those things to begin with because it's less dog-eat-dog and more glorious days of dog walking.

Today's Psalm 121 is a real fan favorite here in Colorado. It's often read at funerals as a psalm of faith and trust in God. We sang it as a hymn earlier in worship. "I lift my eyes to the hills," the psalmist wrote, "from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth." The imagery in this psalm isn't hard for us to imagine at the foot of the Rockies. What is hard is remembering that God's help comes in the form of people through relationship. From the beginning, the Bible's stories often focus on people's responsibility to each other as God continues to show up for them. When the Old Testament covenants between God and God's people are broken, they are broken by God's people not taking care of most vulnerable among them – the widow, orphan, and stranger.

Jesus, the one who saves us from ourselves and expands our love of self towards God and our neighbor, was raised in the Biblical, Jewish tradition of caring for the vulnerable, and expands God's earliest covenant to the Jews around us through the very same Jesus. If I had a whiteboard here with me, I would draw ever expanding circles, first with Abraham, then with Moses, and then with Jesus. Each covenant getting larger, including more people across a wider world. When we are tempted to exclude, God keeps drawing a bigger circle. Because God's circle is ever-expanding, Mental Health Sunday expands the circle for us as a congregation too.

“I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.” These words are also about being able to take our joy, our pain, our anger, and our longings straight to God. God whose disconnect and despair was embodied in Jesus as he hung on a cross. Imagining Jesus on the cross was part of my own prayers for healing when I couldn’t see through the dark. Many times, I didn’t have the words to pray but I could see Jesus’ feet and felt comforted by God who was in the shadow with me. Digging out of the darkness was painstaking and took a lot of other people working with me, along with God’s promise that there IS light in the darkness and the darkness cannot, will not, never will overcome it.³

Thanks be to God. And amen.

³ John 1:5, although, read all of John 1:1-14, its powerful promise of God’s presence is noteworthy.