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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens
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 Texts: Psalm 13, Mark 5:24b-34

Alone in the Crowd

- Did you know that there are over 44,000 suicides in the US each year? That's three times the number of murders.
- Did you know that if you are in the military you are more likely to kill yourself than be killed in combat, for suicide is the leading cause of death in the army?ⁱ
- Did you know that for every completed suicide there are 25 failed attempts?
- Or that every suicide has devastating effects on at least six other people, which adds up to over 5.5 million Americans since 1991?ⁱⁱ

These statistics are catastrophes with the tears wiped off. They cry out to be heard because each one represents a precious life, a remarkable, worthy, beloved child of God. September is national suicide prevention month so I am addressing this critical issue now. Additionally, our Wednesday@First after-dinner program on September 27 will be on this subject. If there's any place we should be able to talk about suicide, it is at church.

Unfortunately the history of what the church has had to say on the matter of suicide has not always been kind. For centuries suicide was seen as a sin. Fortunately, this has changed. Suicide is a mental health issue. We now understand that depression can kill just like cancer. Also our understanding of God has changed. We experience God has a caring parent rather than the punishing disciplinarian of, say, our Puritan forbearers.

But even so, society has been slow to let go of the stigma of suicide. Shame seems to cling to it like lint on a dark shirt. This is not good. It only compounds the pain that suicide already causes. We need to bring suicide and suicidal depression out into the open and respond to those affected with compassion and grace, not condemnation and judgment. This is especially true among us in the community of faith.

There are suicides in the Bible—at least six. None is condemned. They are all reported matter-of-factly. Beyond those six, there are other cases of people who contemplated suicide. One of them was Elijah, as we heard last week. His lemon was squeezed dry. The psalms reflect, no doubt, the feelings of many depressed persons, perhaps depressed enough to take their own lives. Psalm 13 is one of those laments. You can hear the emotional turmoil and grief. “How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?” Feeling abandoned even by God, the psalmist pleads for a return of joy and vitality, else he will kill himself: “Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death.”

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The biblical person I want us to focus on for a moment is the woman with the hemorrhages for twelve years. She was not explicitly suicidal according to the text, but I think she could have been headed in that direction. Imagine with me what her life might have looked like.

Girls in her day were typically married off at puberty, but in her case if her continual menstrual bleeding had manifested itself right away, she would have been passed over because Levitical law forbade marital relations under these circumstances.ⁱⁱⁱ If her condition came later, her husband would likely have divorced her for the same reason. Either way would have been a devastating blow. In the world she inhabited, the only secure place for a woman was in the bonds of marriage. But it was not to be for her. Twelve long years now she has slept alone on her single bed. Glancing out her narrow doorway, which no one but she ever enters or exits, she can see another woman. That woman is bending over a small child, tending to a scraped knee. A scene as simple as this, and so common for others, rips her already broken heart. “I will never be a mother,” she thinks for the ten thousandth time as unbidden tears fill her eyes.

She washes her bloody rag and hangs it behind her hovel. There’s no hiding. Everyone knows, but no one talks, at least not to her. “Unclean” is the word they use to describe her. She’s ritually impure. Therefore, she’s never made the trip to Jerusalem to the temple. Not ever to be touched by others because she would render them unclean (temporarily) as well, she has withdrawn to her narrow, solitary life. Dark thoughts are her only companions. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take. There is no way out. God, if you even exist, why are you so far away.”

Her dress is stained and becoming threadbare. She was once a woman of some means, but no longer. She has spent everything she had desperately trying first one physician, then another. Her complexion is pale. Every small act requires effort. A jar of mixed herbs sits on her table, yet another potion that does not work. “Soon I will be reduced to begging,” she fears. “My life is a downward spiral. There is no solution to my problems. I have nothing to live for. No one would miss me if I were gone.”

Social isolation, illness, financial distress, and emotional pain are circumstances which understandably could cause a person to think suicidal thoughts. Other triggers might be legal problems, prolonged unemployment, the loss of reputation, arrest or being caught doing something bad, the death of a close friend or family member (especially by suicide), diagnosis of a long-term debilitating disease, domestic violence, rape, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or divorce. Interestingly, men divorcing are ten times more likely to die by suicide than women going through divorce. Bullying, especially cyber bullying, plus media that glorify suicide like the recent t.v. series “Thirteen Reasons,” might lead someone to think about ending it all.

In addition to these situations, there are behaviors that might signal someone is thinking about suicide. If the person withdraws from activities and relationships, if there’s drug or alcohol abuse, if there’s unnecessary risk taking, if he or she gives away prize possessions, if hygiene becomes poor or there’s a change in eating or sleeping habits, if you notice any of these behaviors they are signs that something is wrong. If a person is always in a depressed mood or feels worthless and hopeless, that’s a red flag. Forty percent of suicide victims are clinically depressed. But sixty percent are not, so don’t assume that someone who looks normal on the outside is not suffering terribly on the inside. In some cases there is a sudden elevation in a person’s mood just prior to killing themselves as making the decision to end their life brings long-for peace and relief.

Let me say here that if you missed the signs of suicidal depression in someone who died by suicide, or you saw them and did everything you could, but to no avail, *be gentle and merciful with yourself!* Others, *be gentle and merciful* with these dear children of God! *God is indeed gentle and merciful with us all*, and we are called to be the same.

The emotional and spiritual suffering that suicidal people experience is tremendous. One of you shared the heart-breaking note left by a step-brother who took his own life. With permission, I'll read it to you:

I suppose to be perfectly rational I should write something about the disposition of all my property but somehow that doesn't seem to be important. What really matters is how I think, how I feel. I am tired of being lonely, of feeling an unhappiness that no one knows about, that no one can alter. There is a line from Zelazny, "The dance was good. Now let it end." It is just a shame that all the wrong people will be hurt. Weep not, friends. I suffer no longer.

How tragic that this very gifted young man could not see any other way out, that he felt so alone, so hopeless. How tragic that he decided on a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

On one particular day the hemorrhaging woman overhears some other women talking about a rabbi named Jesus. Reportedly he has healed all sorts—the sick, the maimed, even lepers. They say that just across the lake the rabbi has cured a deranged, demon-possessed man who called himself Legion. He is crossing the lake and coming this way. "Hurry," the women say to one another. "Let's go see this miracle man. He must be truly sent by God."

Our woman finds herself there by the lake among the throng which has gathered. Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, has pushed his way through to the front and fallen at Jesus' feet. He begs Jesus repeatedly to come to his house for his daughter is at the point of death.

Jesus goes. The crowd follows. There are women carrying their infants with toddlers in tow. There are fishermen who have left their boats and carpenters, their shops. No one notices that she is jostling along with the rest. An impulse overtakes her. "I will be well if I can just touch his clothes." Is it desperation? Is it some spark of instinctual self-survival? Is it some attraction to holiness? Whatever it is that causes her to reach out and touch Jesus' cloak, it takes great courage. She reaches across religious and social taboos and barely brushes her fingers on his garment. When she does, she immediately feels different. She is, thank heavens, healed.

Jesus stops and turns around. "Who touched my clothes?"

"You're crazy," his disciples say. "With all these people pressing in around you, how can you say, 'Who touched my clothes.'"

Jesus looks around, not with accusation, but with kindness. Knowing what she has done, and trembling because of the awesome power which has healed her, the woman falls at his feet. She tells him the whole truth.

Then Jesus says to her, "Daughter." Daughter--not a condescending, patriarchal address, but a compassionate, inclusive address, one that affirms that she is not alone but part of the family, his family---"Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease."

That encounter changed the course of the woman's life.

Jesus did a couple of simple but critical things. He paid attention. He connected. He listened compassionately. As the church of Jesus Christ, you and I are called to be Christ to one another. Especially with people who are suffering, who find themselves alone in the crowd, we are called to pay attention, to connect, and to listen compassionately.

I find it striking that a key part of the story is when the woman tells Jesus “the whole truth.” There is great healing power in telling the truth about ourselves, in sharing our stories. Having another person hear what we have been through and are currently feeling, without judgment but with sensitivity and love, can make all the difference.

Kevin Briggs is retired from the California Highway Patrol. In his career, he responded to hundreds of mental illness and suicide calls at the Golden Gate Bridge. In cases he’s been directly involved in, he’s only lost two—two too many, he says. “What made you decide not to jump?” he asked one man. “You listened. You let me speak. You just listened,” was the reply.^{iv}

Frederick Buechner in his book *Telling Secrets* writes,

I have come to believe that by and large the human family all has the same secrets, which are both very telling and very important to tell. They are telling in the sense that they tell people the central paradox of our condition—that what we hunger for perhaps more than anything else is to be known in our full humanness and yet that’s often just what we fear more than anything else.^v

We often don’t ask, “What’s going on?” because we think people want privacy or that it will embarrass them. Please, do not be afraid to connect, to pay attention, to listen compassionately to each other’s stories, to each other’s secrets, to each other’s pain. I learned recently that if you suspect someone is suicidal you should ask. Asking does not plant a seed. Instead it opens the door for the other to talk. Say something like, “Does it ever get so bad that sometimes you think about suicide?” Then listen to what they have to say. People who are suicidal have lost two things: social connection and hope. Your caring can bridge that gap.

This gospel story ends on a hope-filled note. Psalm 13 ends on a hope-filled note. Suicide is preventable. God in Christ who descended into hell, as we confess in the Apostle’s Creed, understands the hell of suicidal depression. God does not abandon us in the storms and floods of despair. God can turn back the chaos and restore people to health and community. God can and does do this through you and me. So pay attention. Connect. Listen compassionately. And if you are one who is alone in the crowd, *please, please, please, reach out!*

ⁱ “Making Space for Veterans” by Logan Isaac, *The Christian Century*, January 8, 2012

ⁱⁱ <http://www.suicidology.org/Portals/14/docs/Resources/FactSheets/2015/2015datapgsv1.pdf?ver=2017-01-02-220151-870> on 9/15/17

ⁱⁱⁱ See Leviticus 15:19-30

^{iv} https://www.ted.com/talks/kevin_briggs_the_bridge_between_suicide_and_life on 9/15/17

^v <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/tellingsecrets/> on 9/15/17