

Sermon on Mental Health & Substance Use Disorder

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is an epidemic among us, threatening our children, our families, and our loved ones. It can be silent, and it can be swept under the rug, and it can be denied. But it cannot be ignored.

One in every five adults experience mental illness - that is 20 percent of us in an average year. But less than half of those with a mental illness receive any treatment.

About 22.5 million people suffer from substance abuse, but only 12 percent of them received treatment.

The faith community across the Valley have united to talk about an important and timely topic: mental health and substance use struggles. During Red Ribbon week, we joined with our fellow community members to talk about how we can make a difference for those friends and family members and loved ones suffering among us. We focused on a message of hope and recovery for individuals and families struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues. This time reminds us that we must hold close those who need us and not fear being open about these issues.

Mental illness can strike anyone – it does not discriminate by age, gender or race. You may recall the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4:7-30. Jesus asks for water from an outcast – a woman who has had five husbands and is living with still another. Jesus boldly initiates the conversation with the woman at the well, knowing the cultural taboos of a man speaking to a woman and a Jew addressing a Samaritan. Their lengthy conversation centers on the theme of “living water,” which Jesus promises to this woman.

Individuals struggling with addictions and other mental illnesses such as depression also thirst for “living water,” as their minds, bodies and spirits are affected. Those living with mental illness in biblical times were often banished from their communities because people feared behavior they did not understand. Jesus did not dwell on the Samaritan woman’s past, which was contrary to how women normally behaved then. Rather he

gave us an example of how his followers can initiate a relationship with those struggling with these illnesses.

Jesus clearly understood that all people of faith, and especially those who are separated from their faith community for whatever reason, need to be offered a drink from the deep well of "living water" so they may find the gift of new life.

The major reason many people do not get the treatment they need for a mental illness is the prejudice and fear that still surround these illnesses in our society. Most fear and prejudice comes from a lack of understanding. The Church and its members – each of us - can and should learn ways to be supportive and helpful to people struggling with mental illness. By offering loving mercy and including those struggling with mental illness in our prayers and in the life and good work of our congregations, we will give hope to those who often feel hopeless.

Furthermore, as a community, it is our responsibility to take action to seek professional resources and offer our support to those struggling with substance abuse and mental illness. There are many resources available, and with the help of professionals and our love and compassion, people who face such issues can begin their journey to recovery.

In the Acts of the Apostles 4:7-12, Peter stated: "There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved." Our living faith teaches us that our salvation is through Jesus, he who is the one Mediator between God and man. [1 Tim. 2:5-6] It is through Jesus alone that we find the forgiveness of sins that leads to our salvation.

And God also looks to us to help ourselves when troubled - to seek solutions. Gone are the days in which we tried to explain troubling behaviors by labeling them as an evil spirit or as punishment from God. We know now that addiction is an illness and that treatment works. What does mental illness and addiction look like? Some symptoms of mental illness could include lack of sleep, inappropriate mood swings, physical exhaustion, feeling rejected and worthless, unreasonable anger, isolation and irrational negative thoughts about life. If you or someone you love is exhibiting any of these behaviors,

please look for help. There are services available right here in our own community, and we can help get you connected to them.

Medical science has taught us much about mental illness. As people of faith, we are called to share God's love and compassion with those who are hurting. We can and should be instruments of healing and comfort for those we know are suffering from a mental illness and addiction through no fault of their own. Please reach out and give a helping hand to those in our families and our community who are struggling. We must show them they are not alone, that recovery is possible, that help from professionals is available, and that the Church encourages people to use these resources. Through faith, compassion and action, each one of us can make a difference.

We are all probably familiar with the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John which reminded us through the spoken words of Jesus that he is the Good Shepherd. What is the difference between the Good Shepherd and the hired hand? When the hired hand sees the wolf approaching, he abandons the sheep. After all, why should he risk his life for what is not his? But, the Good Shepherd lays down his life to save his sheep from the approaching wolf. So loving and caring is the Good Shepherd that when he sees one of his sheep is missing, he will leave the 99 who are safe to go and find the one that has gone astray.

Half of all lifetime mental illnesses begin by age 14.

When one of our youth has a mental health illness, or is struggling with addiction, he or she often feels lost and abandoned by family, friends and maybe even the Church. When mental illness or behavioral issues strike in young adulthood, families often tell how they experience being "lost" from their Churches much like the lost son or the lost sheep.

Like the prodigal son who comes home, if a child does not seem to be headed in the right direction, parents need to know the signs and not be afraid to intervene.

Our Church can play a vital role in educating our parishioners so that we can be a safe and supportive community for the youth and the families struggling with these issues.

So, when we encounter someone suffering from addiction or other mental health issues, let's take action. Reach out and help with love and courage. Share available resources. Just like a strong family can build a strong faith, a strong family can be the rock for those afflicted by mental health issues. With our faith and professional help, those who are suffering can recapture their lives with purpose and joy.

When we celebrate our youth, let us do our part to ensure they are healthy in mind, body and spirit. When we see a lost child who is facing mental illness, including substance abuse, let's remember that we have an obligation to reach out to this child. As you've heard today, the Bible gives us examples of how we should care for individuals with a mental illness and their families. The scriptures lead us away from our impulse to blame those who are struggling and to focus instead on acceptance and support. When we surround them with our love and care, everyone can celebrate a time of healing and recovery in the family of faith.

Since today we focus our homily on raising awareness for mental health and substance abuse issues, I would like to take a moment as a humble instrument of the Lord to draw to God those who think they may be facing emotional distress.

And I urge you to learn more about the different resources available to you through organizations like Terros Health and the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Our Sunday bulletins this month include contact numbers to get information and help in English and Spanish, so please feel to take a copy and share it with those who might need it.

The Church today is also called to embrace those who struggle with mental illness and to be instruments of healing and wholeness. For persons experiencing a mental illness, we can be instruments of God's love by extending care, compassion and hope to those in the grip of darkness and despair.

As we continue with the celebration of this calling, may our minds be strengthened by the Word of God and the communion that we are about to receive. And let us humbly ask the Heavenly Father for his grace to shine on our Church and our members by the power of his Spirit so we may be blessed with compassion, understanding and acceptance for those who may be suffering from a mental illness or substance abuse.

May they seek and receive the professional help they need, and may we provide them with the support they require to recover and become healthy citizens of our community.