

God's Beloved Ones
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13:44

The story of Judas' suicide is not a cautionary tale against betrayal.

As I sat down to write this sermon, I was struck by the fact that this story of suicide is not unique yet stigmas holds us back. Stigma holds us back from having important conversations about suicide. Stigma holds us back from acknowledging that suicide is present within our community here in Lexington. Stigma holds us back from our community resources to best support people who are struggling with suicidal thoughts or feelings. This all means that we mostly discuss or think about suicide privately, as families and individuals. In the October 5th copy of The Lexington Minuteman, I learned more about the mental health crisis here in Lexington. The findings of the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey that was conducted at both middle and high school levels were upsetting. I wanted to share some of the numbers that they published. In 2017, it was reported that 17.2% of high school students were considering suicide at the time this survey was taken. This coincides with the fact that one in ten high school students reported that they had previously created a suicide plan and 4% reported a prior attempt to die by suicide. At the 7th and 8th grade level, 15.4% considered suicide at the time the survey was taken. At this age, the survey also saw increases in those reporting that they had created a plan and, further, had previously attempted suicide. Our youth here in Lexington and beyond are familiar with concerns surrounding suicide and, also, mental illness. There is a high chance that they or someone they know may be facing mental illness. Our youth are not alone either. Among others: people of color, members of the military and veterans, people who suffer from chronic illness, and people bereaved by suicide are all at a greater risk for suicide or suicide attempts than the general public.

Again, the story of Judas' suicide is not a cautionary tale against betrayal. It is a cautionary tale against abandoning those we love and care for when we see them struggling. We do not know much about Judas' personal narrative; we simply know that his suicide is mentioned twice in Christian Scripture. We read about it this morning in our reading from Matthew and it is mentioned a second time in the Book of Acts. Since he is not given much air time within the Christian canon, we do not know much about what he was thinking nor what was discussed following his suicide. We can infer that he was riddled with guilt and the feelings of total disconnect. The disciples and the communities that followed Jesus failed to acknowledge the suicide beyond what was shared with us today; they were quick to rid him of the title of disciple and replace him. Truth is that Judas is not given much attention because he is seen as a traitor and he died by suicide... both of which are very difficult to engage in community and public life. Rather than focusing on the darkness that Judas faced, we focus on Judas' misdirected actions. We focus on the fact that Judas turned Jesus in to the oppressive empire that threatened life with death. Yet, Jesus always knew that fighting for social justice is dangerous. Jesus was not surprised that one of his doubting, desperate, scared disciples would be responsible for turning him in. I believe Jesus knew that he would pay that price eventually. He was ever ready to "lay down his life" for his friends and to give for "the least of these." He was always welcoming without judgment, hoping to deter guilt and shame while also naming the hard truths. In the chapter prior to this morning's reading, we learn that Jesus made it clear that he knew that Judas would be led to betray him. He did so by speaking truth in love, knowing that Judas was struggling and disconnecting from others.

Likewise, Jesus also knew that Peter would deny him three times and made that fact known. Even though Jesus knew that Judas would betray and Peter would deny, he included them in his last meal. It was presence that Jesus gave Judas and Peter on that final night, it was not

condemnation. Love trumped betrayal and denial. Judas' suicide is a challenge to love those who might be struggling in ways we cannot see. Judas' suicide also challenges us to be love and light to those who struggle in ways that might lead them to disconnect from their communities in harmful or difficult ways. I believe that Judas was vulnerable and the oppressive empire took advantage of him. Judas was vulnerable to the darkness that consumes all light and he was vulnerable to the loss of faith that comes with sadness in the depths of despair. In the end, the oppressive empire would leave the faith leaders directly involved to turn Judas away when he recanted his testimony against Jesus. Judas felt disconnected from the other disciples and their teacher as well as from the group of people that had turned him against other Jesus followers. I can only imagine that this would have left Judas, a man with little to no light or faith, to die of suicide. I can only imagine that the loneliness he faced led Judas to feel there were no other options. Not entirely unlike Judas, we or someone we know has been to those dark places where light cannot touch. We or someone we know has had to face the sadness that comes from the depths of despair. Like Judas, we or someone we know has had struggles that led to feelings of disconnection from community, family, and friends. Perhaps, being told to "let God be your light" is a platitude you have said or heard during the struggle with mental illness. In the depths of despair, you may have been told that: "God will not give you what you cannot handle." Worse yet, you may have been told that "everything happens for a reason" when you tended to your own struggle with mental illness. These statements are all platitudes that, while they seem inspiring, fail to acknowledge the deep pain experienced by those who are struggling to find hope. The impacts of these words often undermine the intent, leaving people to feel more isolated and alone. Many people have faced mental illness head-on and have found themselves feeling reconnected with community, family, and friends. I know this to be true because I have learned, through my own struggles with mental illness, that I was never really disconnected at all. For many of us, some combination of the presence of community, therapy, and the right medication brought us out of the depths of despair.

As I prepared this sermon, Judas reminded me to think about hell. You see, I do not believe in the eternal damnation kind of hell. I don't even believe in the fire-y pits kind of hell. Nor do I believe in the hell that could have come out of horror films. You might be asking yourself: "What kind of hell does he believe in?" Well, I believe that hell is not a place we go but rather a space we hold. Hell begins with the feeling of disconnect not just from our communities, families, or friends but can be followed by a complete and utter feeling of disconnect from God. It is a dark place with no light; it is the depths of faithlessness. And yet, there is nothing we do to deserve it, we are a people saved by God's love. We've got grace and mercy on our side. Grace assures us that there is "nothing we can do to separate ourselves from the love of God." Hell is not God's place of punishment but rather a place where God is still present with us whether we believe it or not. God has not disconnected with us while we go through hell, though we may have felt disconnected from God. Depression and mental illness can be hell for many people. I know there are others here in this church who might have found themselves in hell. You may have found yourself so deeply out of touch with God. If not, there are people in this church who might find that hell resonates with what they have seen others experience. So, you may be asking yourself: "What are we supposed to do when we see others going through hell?" I say that we follow the call to embody the love and light of Jesus and be God's presence for those struggling with mental illness.

As faithful people, we need to be open and present to other people's struggles. We need to be ready to hear the stories of others, no matter how uncomfortable they make us. We may need to share our own stories, trusting that those around us want to connect with us more deeply. Ultimately, we need to be God's love to one another. We need to be Christ's feet on the ground. Again, I say that Judas' suicide is not a cautionary tale against betrayal. It is a cautionary tale against abandoning those we love and care for when we see them struggling. Like Jesus, we are called to welcome all to the table no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey.

We are called to include each person in our communities of faith whenever possible. This is only the beginning of the conversations I hope we will have. Churches everywhere are beginning to ask: "How do we welcome and include those struggling with mental illness?" May we, too, begin to engage this question remaining faithful to the lessons in scripture and to the love of God!

Amen.