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A Faith-filled Response to Suicide
Psalm 88 and Romans 8:38-39

(If you're thinking about suicide or are worried about a friend or loved one, the Lifeline network is available 24/7 across the United States. Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) at any time for help.)

Today I am preaching about what it means to offer a faith filled response to suicide. I want you all to know this because suicide touches all of us differently and perhaps today is not the day some folks here are able to spend reflecting on suicide. So it is ok to get up and go out. (It is always ok to get up and go out during a sermon, truly.)

It is ok to go sit in the sun in the Sun Room for a bit. Or check out what's on tap for coffee hour. If you or someone you love is struggling with suicidal thoughts, the suicide hotline number is printed in your bulletin. There is help.

This is what I want to tell you today:

1. Suicide is not a sin against God. I do not believe this. The UCC does not believe this. The majority of Christian traditions do not believe this.
2. Suicide needs to be talked about openly so it is no longer taboo. And there are ways to talk about suicide that are more helpful than others. Isolation is the one common thread in all suicides.
3. There is help available. You or those you know and love do not have to struggle alone.

First, let me tell you why I'm preaching on suicide.

I have lost people I loved to suicide. Maybe you have, too. And I have almost lost people I loved to suicide in my family, only learning about it decades later when word finally came out. It was a secret, a taboo topic, a shameful thing hidden away.

Death by suicide has increased every year since 1999 in people age 10 to 74. It's the 2nd leading cause of death for youth age 10-24. Talking about it makes a huge difference

At the last church I served as a settled pastor, a member died by suicide. No one knew how he had struggled. No one knew what he was hiding, including his wife. This man I cared about was always my reader on Easter Sunday. He had to work most other Sundays. I can remember him speaking the great words of resurrection and hope, but then chose to put an end to the despair that haunted him.

At his memorial I stated that this man died by suicide but in actuality he died of a terminal illness—which for him was deep depression. Suicide is a desperate act. It happens when for a person all hope is extinguished; they can't see anything else. It is often hidden from family, friends, spouses, loved ones—all those who might help a person find hope again.

And it is hidden in the church because in some religious traditions, suicide is considered to permanently remove one from God.

Catholic teaching is still somewhat squishy on this saying that a person who "willfully and knowingly" chooses suicide would still be considered to be in a state of mortal sin as it is

contrary to both love of God and love of self, and that it goes against the basic human instinct to preserve life.

However, the church acknowledges that most people who die by suicide suffer from mental illness and are thus incapable of making a clear, rational decision. John Paul II first articulated this position in 1992. He also emphasizes that the church should pray for those who die by suicide and should not fear for their eternal salvation.

I want to be very, very clear on this point myself. There are few things I have absolute certainty about but I am certain that suicide does not damn you to hell. Suicide does not separate a person from God forever. It does not separate one from God at all.

What I know to be true is that God walks with us each day our whole lives through. God celebrates with us, God cries with us, God whispers to us, and God calls to us with great love even as we sometimes are totally unable to hear God's voice. And at the end of our life no matter how it ends, even at our own hand, God is there to gather us, to resurrect us to new life, to join the great mystery that is on the other side of life as we know it.

As we heard in the scripture today, first the Psalmist yelling at God, despairing, feeling left alone in the darkness. And at the other pole, these verses from Romans, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Even in those despairing times when we cannot find God, even if we come to a point of ending our life because the despair is unbearable. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing. That is a great comfort. For that means that God is larger than we are. And God is larger than any despair we travel through. And God is larger than death.

Whenever I serve a new church I make sure to preach on suicide, like I am today, because I believe as faith communities we can have a big impact on how suicide is viewed and talked about.

From the stories we have in our Bible we know that Jesus did a lot of healing. Particularly with those "afflicted with a demon" or an "unclean spirit" etc which were first century ways of talking about mental illness. In fact Jesus heals more folks with psychological/spiritual or mental health challenges than all his other healings combined.

First, this speaks to us about the importance of healing in this way. Jesus prioritized it. It speaks to us of Jesus love, a love that was shown just as much to someone on the edge of suicide as someone born blind or struggling with an bleeding disorder.

Jesus, the actual "in the flesh-ness" of God's love, reaches out to and loves those in despair.

It speaks to us about the need, a need that is not diminished now. Suicide is on the rise in this country. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for college students. Suicide is rising particularly middle aged white women and elderly men. Twenty-two veterans die from suicide every day. Farmers in the Midwest are also dying from suicide at increasing rates.

This has been a tough week or so in the news with deaths by suicide of two teenage survivors of the Parkland shooting who could not continue amidst their deep despair and PTSD. We also

heard of the death of the father of one of the children killed in the Newtown school shooting. In our own neighborhood, there was the death by suicide of a teen in Bedford.

We need to have a conversation about suicide in the church. Because as the church we are a place that speaks of unbounded love and that healing is possible. We in the church seeking to follow in Jesus' footsteps can offer the same grace he did to others in that same place of despair. And that begins with honest open conversation.

I heard recent story on Story Corps about the struggles of veterans. This was a mom's story about her son:

"He was a happy-go-lucky kid. When he was in tee-ball, one time he hit the ball, went to second base, and then turned around and said, 'Mom, I made half of a home run.' That was kind of how he looked at life — his cup half-full.

"He always wanted to be in the military, So when he was 24, he enlisted and then was sent to Iraq for a year. And he told me some stories, but he said, 'There's a lot of stories that I can't tell you, Mom.' He didn't sleep well; he had nightmares. And that twinkle in his eye was gone.

"He took his life August 2, 2012. And, you know, as a mother, when your child's heart is full of joy, your heart's full of joy. And knowing what a dark place he must have been to do this is almost more than I could bear.

"Since then, I have his two sons that I help care for. His first son is 8 and, not long ago, he asked me, 'How did Daddy die?' And I said to him, 'Daddy died from war because he had a very sad heart.'"

Yes. A very sad heart. A broken place inside.

That is something an eight year old can understand. Kids understand a lot and once we understand that suicide is as much of a risk for our children as not wearing a seat belt while driving, or using alcohol or drugs, or engaging in risky sexual behavior, we can see the conversation again not as taboo, but as part of all the challenging things we talk to our kids about.

I've talked with my son about suicide. He's just turned ten. It was a conversation that was harder than ones about how humans evolved, but perhaps easier than ones about why God doesn't prevent tragedies from happening.

The key with both kids and adults is that we speak in an upfront way about suicide.

- Suicide is not a failure of character
- Attempting suicide does not make one a bad person
- And while the precipitating events that lead people to die by suicide are different, the one commonality for almost everyone is a sense of being alone, of not being able to share their struggles, of being unreachably alone and in pain.

As the church I want us to be able to pray for the unknown folks contemplating suicide and for family members hurting because of a loved one's death by suicide.

If someone at Pilgrim is recovering from attempting suicide, I want us to be able to lift that up in the prayers just like we do for those recovering from heart attack or car accident.

If someone at Pilgrim is grieving losing a loved one to suicide, I want us to be able to name that grief just as we name the ones we miss that we lose in other ways.

I want us to tell people over and over that they are not alone, that help is available, that suffering in silence is not a sign of strength. One of the best PSAs for suicide prevention that I've seen aimed at veterans says "the hardest lift you might do today is picking up the phone." It is not a sign of weakness. You are not alone.

There are some helpful things to know as we talk about suicide. These are recommendations from national suicide prevention groups:

- Be direct and open when talking about suicide and non-judgemental
- Say some "died by suicide" rather than "committed suicide"
- Know the risk factors and the warning signs for suicide to be more aware for yourself and for others you love

One thing we do well in the church when we are at our best is walk with people. We walk together especially during the tough times whether that is divorce, losing a child to cancer, having a miscarriage, having a parent slide into dementia and more. I believe we can be a powerful presence for and with each other in the reality of suicide and mental health struggles. I mean, this is something you already do well.

Vanessa McDaniel, who both lost her mother to suicide, is a recovering alcoholic with severe PTSD and is a suicide survivor herself shared this on Live Through This, a website sharing stories of survivors:

"It's not a character thing. In fact, some of the most beautiful people I know, the most amazing people I know, have some form of mental illness. So why can we not say it like we say heart attack or hernia? What's the problem? I mean, if everybody's afraid, well, guess what? I'll put it in your face again. And again and again and again and again. Because it's got to stop. We can't keep making people feel that way. It's not right.

"The shame is not supposed to be there. That shame actually belongs to other people. It belongs to the people who have given it to you through one avenue or another, but it's not ours, and we have a choice whether we pick it up. Just like I have a choice if I'm going to pick up a drink. I have a choice if I'm going to pick up that shame too. It's my choice. It might be a hard choice to make until I get better sometimes, and sometimes I have to wait a minute, but it's a choice—at least for me.

She continues: "Today I don't want to die. Three days ago, I did. Last night, it was a little iffy. It changes. I just have to hang on until this wave is better, because it always does get better. It does. It always gets better.

"I wish I could go back and tell my mom that. On that night when all she could see was the dark, I wish I could tell her, 'Tomorrow the sun will come back. You don't believe me but it will.'" (Livethroughthis.org)

That is the message of our faith.
During this time of Lent.
In the promise of resurrection.
In the spinning out of life around us.

It gets better. And no matter what, God is there to catch us when we can't seem to remember or bear to wait. Always. Nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Amen.

General Resources

Suicide Prevention Resources:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Suicidepreventionlifeline.org

24 hour hotline 1-800-273-TALK

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention afsp.org

Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE) save.org

Talking to Children and Teens

Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide sptsusa.org

“Talking to Your Kids about Suicide”

<http://www.sptsusa.org/parents/talking-to-your-kid-about-suicide/>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/ResourceFinder/Explaining-Suicide...>