Be a support for those with mental illness

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1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20, 14-15, Psalm 138,   2 Corinthians 4:13-:5:1, Mark 3:20-35

INTRODUCTION

When Peter asked me to speak about my chaplaincy work I wondered what could I say about mental health chaplaincy that people would find interesting. So I went and checked the readings for this Sunday and the Gospel from Mark had the answer. In particular this verse referring to Jesus as those around him said "He has gone out of his mind".

What more do I need, than this verse as a starting point, to talk about mental illness.

POINT 1

Having worked as a Mental Health Chaplain for 26 years, in both public and private psychiatric hospitals, I can tell you that it's not just patients who have gone out of their minds, but staff as well, as they try to navigate the complex and often confusing world of mental illness.

So this morning I thought I would talk about what we mean when we say someone is out of their mind or out of their right mind, or to use a more politically correct term, mentally unwell. The first thing I want to say, very strongly, is this, anyone can develop a mental illness. Mental illness can happen to anyone, simply because we all have brains that can stop working well. So, it doesn't matter how intelligent or slow we are, how strong or weak we are, how well off or poor we are, in what country we live, if we are city or rural dwellers, if

we are single, married, de facto, gay, straight, widowed, or orphaned. No one is immune to mental illness, although some people may be more prone to it, but just like Covid or the flu, we can all get sick. Some people with a mental illness have insight or recognition about their unwellness. Other people appear to be completely insightless, deny that they are unwell, refuse treatment completely or are non-compliant.

And I think many of us know where that can lead.

POINT 2

So let's ask the question, why does someone become mentally unwell? As you may guess, there is not a simple answer to this but many factors worth considering. Firstly there are biological factors such as genetic predisposition to certain mental illnesses, like bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and depression. There are also situational factors such as upbringing, various forms of abuse, grief and loss, living in a warzone comes to mind as well. Often a person has both biological and situational factors that contribute to their illness. Sometimes a person may have other illnesses that contribute to their mental illness, such as chronic pain from arthritis, a neurological disease or cancer. Then there are substances that if abused may lead to mental illness, for example alcohol, illicit and over prescribed drugs. And of course there is the age factor. As people age and develop more illnesses, these may contribute to mental illness as well. For example, it is not uncommon for someone with dementia to develop paranoid ideas.

So what I am saying is that many factors contribute to a person's mental wellbeing or illness. It is possible to have a period of being mentally unwell and then things return to normal again. It is also possible to have recurring times of wellness and sickness. It's possible to live one's whole life without any mental illness. It's equally possible to develop a mental illness in one's youth and never to be well again.

POINT 3

As a community of faith, what does all this have to do with us? Quite a lot really. As a community we are called to love, accept and care for those who are sick and vulnerable. Jesus was always interested in those who were outcasts in his day. Today's outcasts are often the mentally ill. Ask anyone with a serious mental illness and they will tell you about abandonment, from family, friends and society. Jesus always had time for outcasts. So should we. In fact Jesus spent a good portion of his time being an outcast from his family, from the synagogue, from some of his disciples. He even felt an outcast from God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" was his cry from the cross.

I have often thought that a good indication of how welcoming a Christian community is determined by how welcoming they are of anyone who may be mentally struggling. And I always assume that any one of us could be that person. So we should be open and prepared for people to discuss their mental health or illness, if they wish to, and at the very least know that this is not a taboo subject.

CONCLUSION

Our world is a difficult place to inhabit at this point in time. It is not surprising that many people struggle with their mental health. I find it very interesting that while we as a society seem to acknowledge the growing number of people struggling with their mental wellbeing, at the same time we have far less hospital psychiatric beds now than 20 years ago. As a Christian community let us make every effort to address this issue with wisdom and sensitivity. Let us avoid simplistic answers to very complex problems, but rather listen, learn, share and offer support. Amen.