

# *“Depression: From the Pit of Despair We Can Rise in New Life”*

*(Second of Five in the Series,  
“Mental Illness: The Journey In, The Journey Out”)*

*20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*August 14, 2016*

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 15, August 14, 2016, dedicated to all our members, family, co-workers and friends who struggle with depression, to Paloma Lolia Nadine Braide-Schoenlaub on her baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

+++++

*“Depression: From the Pit of Despair*

*We Can Rise in New Life”*

*Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56*

*Sermon Text: Psalm 40:1-3*

*Second of Five in the Series*

*“Mental Illness: The Journey In, The Journey Out”*

+++++

*Psalm 40:1-3*

*I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.*

*<sup>2</sup> He drew me up from the desolate pit,  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.*

*<sup>3</sup> He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear,  
and put their trust in the LORD.*

+++++

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of  
each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock  
and our salvation. Amen.*

+++++

On a visit with a dear friend many years ago, I entered his home, and stepped into a well-lit room where one of my beloved friends was sitting over a cup of tea. It was a beautiful sunny day and the natural light from southeast was filling the room with brilliance and warmth. I had sat at this table in the kitchen many times before sharing memories, reflections on politics, everyday life, theology and stories of faith and family.

**But today was different.** My friend was still, barely able to acknowledge that I had come to see him. As I reached to greet him, he extended no hand and shared none of the warmth that we usually exchanged. No smile. No eye contact. Something was wrong. He was really struggling to be present. I asked how he was feeling. After a long pause, he said, *“I am depressed. I am seriously depressed.”* Then he was silent. We sat in silence for a long time. No words expressed. No memories. No stories of faith and family.

Then I asked, *“what does your depression look like? What does it feel like?”* He looked right in my eyes, only 18 inches from his and he answered, *“It feels like I am in a deep, dark pit. The walls are dark and steep. I see no light. I cannot climb out. The pit surrounds me and swallows me.”* Here we were, in a room filled with light and he was being swallowed in a pit of

utter darkness. I held his hand and after a while, with tears flowed down my face I said, *“I am so sorry.”* Looking at his wife, I said, *“Together we will help you find a way out.”* Our eyes locked and our hands held on. The long ascent from the pit had begun.

It was “Love, Medicine and Miracles” to quote Dr. Bernie Siegel that pulled my friend out of the pit of despair. Through the power of a loving wife and family, of loving friends who believed in him, his own prayer and spirituality, and a great combination of the right medicine and a great therapist he was able to find a way out of his pit. And that, was the miracle! That was God in all of this. Like David in Psalm 40, *“God drew him from the desolate pit and set his feet upon a rock and secured his steps. God put a new song in his mouth, a song of praise.”*

My friend was a man living with depression. That was so important. Rather than accept his words that he WAS depressed, I wish I said what was in my heart that day... but it would have been too much. I was thinking, “You are a loving, capable, beautiful, gentle, spiritual man living with depression.” In dealing with mental illnesses or brain diseases, it is always important that we speak of the person before us

(whether in the mirror or in the chair before us) as a person who may have a mental challenge. He or she is not “crazy,” although their behavior may be erratic. Just as I don’t say about a person with MS or cancer that they ARE “MS” or call them “that cancer person,” so I should not label someone as schizophrenic or depressed. Always a person first. Always!

Prayer was central to lifting my friend “out of the miry bog and God who set his feet on a sure rock.” I love what author Anne Lamont says of prayer. She says there are three elements of prayer: **HELP...THANKS...WOW**. **HELP** is the cry we deliver often into the darkness of our depression and despair. In the pit, we are finally able to put one word together. That word is **HELP**. We cry out when we don’t know what else to do. It is the point when we become open to the Divine. We are broken so much that we open up to the Holy One, the Sacred power of the Universe. **THANKS** is our prayer of gratitude. We whisper “thanks” when we have reached the rim of the pit and we are climbing out into the warmth of the sunshine. Covered in the mud of our struggle, we smile – maybe for the first time in a long time and say, **THANKS**. It is a prayer we should offer as soon as it is possible and as often as it is possible in our daily lives. **THANKS God! THANKS**

Jesus. THANKS Spirit. Thanks friends, family, doctors and more. THANKS. Then there is WOW! WOW is the word of wonder I uttered the first time I opened my eyes and saw my firstborn son, Luke, and Dan, and Thalia, and Sarah. WOW is the prayer that bounces across the Grand Canyon 24/7. It is the prayer we feel when we finally come home, hear we are cancer free, find out that we will not die depressed, find water for the journey and discover that God is still speaking. HELP! THANKS! WOW! They are your prayers. Embrace them. Use them.

While the journey out of depression is often a slow and arduous process, the journey into depression may creep up on you like nightfall in a forest where the path is disappearing under your feet. The ten most common symptoms with depression are: fatigue, sleep problems, general irritability, an inability to concentrate, anxiety, taking drugs and alcohol, loss of intimacy and interest in others, suicidal thoughts, trouble making decisions, and general stress. Depression can hit anyone of us during certain seasons of the year, situations of our lives and in places we have not dealt with the pain and trauma of our existence.

In the midst of lifting, kissing, smiling, and singing with four gold medals and a silver this week, we have been hearing the back story about depression from Michael Phelps. The man who has won more gold medals (and medals in general) than any Olympic athlete in history in any sport hit bottom in November 2014. He was severely depressed. He was drinking, insulating himself, driving while drunk and seriously entertaining thoughts of suicide. He was in the pit. He found help from friends and family and **then through Rick Warren's** book, The Purpose Driven Life. He began the journey with help in a rehab center for 45 days during which time he became reconciled with his father (who left home when he was 9 years old), found out who he really was as a person, and eventually found his way into the arms of the woman who loved him and became his fiancée. He got his relationship with the Divine and his family and friends on the right path and then he started to swim again. Now he is living one day at time. In the coming days, **America's flag bearer at the 2016** Olympics will pull himself out of the water and walk away from swimming into a marriage that is right with a son who is adorable. That is truly Golden!

Needless to say, Michael Phelps is not the first famous person to struggle with a Brain disease. On the Mental Health Ministries website there's a whole section on famous people who have contributed enormously to society who suffered the symptoms of mental illness, some before there was a name for what chronically caused them distress. People like Isaac Newton, Ludwig von Beethoven, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens, Michelangelo, Vincent Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, Jane Pauley, Bet Midler (to name a few) and as Rev. Corzine pointed out in the Pastoral Epistle this week, Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling wrote of her depression, *"...And so rock-bottom became the solid foundation on which I re-built my life."*

In the week before I was preparing to deliver the first sermon in this series, I met with my friend and neighbor Nannette Macijunes, Executive Director of the Columbus Museum of Art. She shared with me that they are breaking all their records for membership and attendance this year. I was so excited. And the Picasso Exhibition which I encourage everyone to see has put them over the top. Pablo Picasso suffered from depression. Out of depression he was able to create colors and designs in art that have drawn people for

generations to see the world differently – as he saw it differently.

Thanks be to God for the courageous leaders, the artists, the writers, the singers, the swimmers and our family and friends who battle through depression. Like J.K Rowling and our Psalmist King David, so many of them begin to rebuild their lives on the solid foundation of rock bottom. From the pit they begin and they are lifted to the rock of deliverance.

The truth is that while 1 in 5 people face some sort of mental illness or brain disease in their lifetime, 1 in 14 live with major depression and 1 in 6 live with anxiety disorder. These are significant numbers in our families, in our church and in our society. We cannot ignore the symptoms in ourselves or our loved ones and colleagues. Being sensitive to those who are missing among us, those who are mired in the bog of deep sadness and those who are isolating in the darkness of rooms in which they rarely ventured before is a calling each one of us can respond to. **If they can't pick up the phone to call, call them. If they can't find their way out of the forest on the edge of darkness, go in to the forest and sit with them through their nights of despair.**

Depression is a biological disease. It is not caused by a lack of will power or desire to be well. **You can't simply run out of** depression, smile your way out or wish your way out. You need help to get out the pit. Here is my hand. Take it. Take the hand of your friends and family. Seek help. Seek treatment. Seek God. But, I beg you to seek. With every ounce of power still left in you, look up, look out, step up, step out, reach up, reach out, come up, come out. Find a way out. God knows, there is sunshine sometime and somewhere ahead of you. Amen.

Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC