

# *“When Mental Illness Hits: Out of the Depths I Cry to You!”*

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

*19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40*

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 7, 2016, 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 15, dedicated to John and Sammy and to all the children and teens, all the women and men who battle mental illness-brain diseases, and to their families who cope or don't cope; wade into the battle, freeze or run away, none knowing exactly what to do but all knowing that love matters and always dedicated to the glory of God!

***“When Mental Illness Hits: Out of the Depths I Cry to You!”***

***Psalm 130***

***(First of Five in the Series,***

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

***Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40***



Tim Ahrens and Sammy Bloom, 1981

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*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.*

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On Monday night December 13, 1982, most of the students, staff and faculty of Yale Divinity School were gathered in the Commons Room for our annual Christmas Party. There we gathered around our beloved 90-year-old Dr. Roland Bainton as he presented from memory one of Martin Luther’s Christmas sermons. The famed author of “Here I Stand” and Yoda-like sage for the ages was giving, was to be, his last Luther Christmas sermon. It was as though we listening to the actual Wittenberg Reformer as Dr. Bainton mesmerized us all with his accent and charm weaving a masterful tale of the birth of our Savior on a cold Palestinian night under stars that danced around the star of Bethlehem.

Half way through the sermon, one of my friends not in attendance (because he suffered from severe anxiety in crowds – and yet had the courage to study for ministry) came into the packed room, found me and told me I had an emergency phone call from my mom. I immediately headed back to our dorm and took the call. “Tim, I have some really tragic news to report. Sammy Bloom has taken his life.” “What?!” I replied.

**“He drove his car off a cliff into the Pacific Ocean one mile from their home in Palos Verdes Estates.”**

Sammy Bloom was my best friend from early childhood. Now he was gone. I knew he had been suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and confusion. A few years before he had hooked up with **“The Jesus People,”** a frightening religious Cult that had taken him out into an Arizona desert. He had escaped to find his way home, but, he was never the same. He had lost his laugh, his ease with people and his joyful disposition. Now he was gone.

Sammy Bloom was only 23 years old when he took his life. As kids we loved to play together. We were inseparable and those around us – insufferable. Whether at church, at our corner lot in town or on his farm, we would play for hours on end. He was bright, ambitious, caring, funny and active in his church. He was thoughtful and faithful follower of Jesus. He was dreaming of a life as a businessman and a golfer. He would have been successful no matter what direction his life went. Now, he was gone.

Mental illness hit Sammy with a vengeance and even though he had a loving family, great treatment at UCLA, and was seemingly on the way out of mental illness, he took his life. He was completely side-swiped by the ravages of mental illness on his road of life and ended up driving off a cliff.

That was my first encounter with losing a close friend. It was my first full throttle meeting with mental illness. Through the years, the names have changed, the stories have changed, the diagnoses have changed. But, mental illness has appeared again and again in my personal life and my life as a pastor. Too often the stories have been your children, your spouses, your siblings, your parents, your family members and yes sometimes it has been you - trapped, side-swiped, knocked off the road of life by mental illness. In recent weeks, emails have told me more, calls have come, conversations over coffee, meals and in the greeting lines have pointed to the stories of your lives deeply impacted by mental illness.

It is because of Sammy, and all of us and our families and friends that I have felt called to open this conversation. For too long, too many have lived too hard of lives with the stigma, the shame, the consequences of suffering from a brain disease. And the church has been one place where the wrath of this has come home hardest for some. To be silent any longer is to be unfaithful.

One of the moments when I shifted from silence to speech came following a prayer group with friends in which 15 of 17 people shared stories one Saturday morning of parents, spouses, children and siblings who had suffered from mental illness. Some shared their own personal struggles, too. Although we had been there for each other for five years, we

had NEVER dug this deep into the pain of our lives and the effects of mental illness on our spiritual journey. I was looking around the room at some of the most companionate people I know realizing that mental illness had deepened them in ways he never sought. Suffering with others who suffer will do that to you.

Then I heard Sammy Bloom calling to me and asking me to be faithful to my calling to preach. Silent no more I stand in front of you and I walk beside you with a broken heart and hope still being born. We are not alone. We have God with us. We have Jesus beside us. We have the Holy Spirit touching us with faith, hope and love. We have each other.

Here we go on a stigma-busting, silence-breaking journey that begins **NOW....**

Let me begin by saying – if you or someone you love has been hurt by the church because of the ways I have spoken, or we have spoken or acted which have caused you pain – in this community or others – I am truly sorry and I ask your forgiveness. For colleagues of mine across any religious community who have caused you pain or injury through mistreatment in words or action, I am sorry as well. It breaks my heart when I hear the Bible and our faith used as a battering ram against anyone. I am so sorry when that has happened to you.

“**Mental Illness can be overwhelming.** Mental illnesses themselves can overwhelm the one in five persons struggling with an illness. But, the issues surrounding the illnesses can also overwhelm the families dealing with the effects of illness. There are issues of treatment, medications, resources, places and people to work with the ones struggling with illnesses. There are issues which also affect the family and support networks. Then there are issues of spirituality and faith – which every person and family member I have known in the battle against mental illness talks with me about. Then there is the whole understanding of what constitutes a mental illness, even the issue of language itself and how we might talk about it. Should we speak about Mental Health, Mental Illness, Brain Illness, Brain Disorder, or just talk about different ways our **brains function?**” (I have drawn from Rev. Dr. Marti McMane, in her Sermon on Mental Illness, 2009).

Then, we are drawn closer as we seek to define brain illnesses. To do this effectively, I have sought out those who know so much more than I. I have turned to NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. NAMI is the largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness.

NAMI teaches us that *“Mental illnesses are medical conditions that disrupt a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental*

*illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life.” (<http://www.nami.org>).*

According to NAMI, serious mental illnesses include, but are not limited to, major depression, psychotic illnesses such as psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder. There is obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mood disorders, borderline personality disorder and various anxiety disorders. Coupled with these illnesses, it is not uncommon to find someone who is also struggling with dual diagnosis which matches one or more of the above mentioned illnesses with drug and/or alcohol abuse and addiction. (<http://www.nami.org>).

Do you see what I mean about being overwhelming?

The good news about mental illness is that recovery is possible; help is available. There are those around us that wake up each day and care for those of us with Brain Illnesses and diagnosed or undiagnosed suffering. TO all in this room who **give themselves to others who suffer, “thank you”** from the bottom of my heart. I would have you stand, except this is your Sabbath and I hope you are resting just a little today from your journey of compassion and hope. Thank you!

One of the best programs to help families dealing with **loved ones with a mental illness** is NAMI’s Family-to-Family program, a twelve session program with trained facilitators who offer tremendous amounts of information and support. One

begins on August 24<sup>th</sup> and there is still room for you to learn and grow through the Family-to-Family program. You can find **all the contact you need for the class in our “Depart to Serve” insert today.**

At the center of our calling as a church is to follow Jesus. We are called to seek the way of Jesus – who healed and mended the broken of body, mind, and soul. He was the greatest stigma-busting spiritual leader of history. If we call ourselves his followers, then we have to do the same as he did. **“Love one another,” he commanded. When he told us to “love our neighbor as ourselves,” he was saying – “love yourself, take care of yourself so you can love your neighbor.”** There were no **“Clauses”** in Jesus’ speech. He never said, **“love only some, love the loveable, love only yourself or love the ones who are sane and not the ones suffering from brain illnesses.”** Jesus knew what we struggle to name. There is something in all of us that is unlovable, perhaps a little quirky, a little off-line in body, mind or soul. In spite of these qualities – all which make us immensely human – Jesus loved us and **COMMANDED US** to love one another. Seems so simple.

Statistically speaking, we know that one in five people has some form of mental illness. That means, if you greeted five people today, you or one of them has or will struggle with mental illness. Guess what? That is where our blessing begins.

We have exchanged “the peace of Christ” with someone that struggles with a lack of peace of mind. Isn’t God good!? Since we don’t talk much (or at all) about this stuff, we assume that the houses we live in, the neighborhoods we live in, the places we work, the places we worship and on and on are packed with people who have no problems. Right? Wrong! One of my mentors, Dr. William Sloane Coffin (in playing off Thomas Harris’ 1969 best-selling book, “I’m Okay, You’re Okay,”) – ***“I’m not okay and you’re not okay, but that’s okay!”*** Amen!

Having said all of this, we are still scared and certainly reluctant to talk about our own struggles with mental health issues or those of our loved ones, primarily because our culture still stigmatizes those who live with mental illness. This makes it difficult to reach out and give support that might be **beneficial in the healing process.** It’s not the kind of illness that the neighbors respond to with a casserole, so often people are isolated and alone. I know this is hard. But, I also know we have the power of God, the power of love, and the power of community to work together to make it easier.

As we come to a close, we are only beginning today. Digging deeper will define the weeks ahead. Through it all, I pray that light will break forth and healing will come a little bit for you and others in your lives. Through it all, my hope and prayer is that we, as a church, will become a safer place where we can talk about mental illness and mental health the same

way we talk about other health challenges. But, I want to leave you with this....

“Mental illnesses, or brain disorders, a terminology some prefer, can affect persons of any age, race, religion, or income. Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character, or poor upbringing. They are not the result of too little faith or lack of prayer. Most mental illnesses are biologically based, and most are treatable. Most people diagnosed with a serious mental illness can experience relief from their symptoms by actively participating in an individual treatment plan, and they can live productive lives sharing their **unique gifts with the world**” (quoted from Rev. Dr. Marti McMane, sermon on Mental Illness, 2009).

Many of you know that the Apostle Paul had some kind of chronic illness that he refers to in his letters in Scripture. Some people have surmised it was epilepsy, which is a brain disorder, but we don't know because he never really talks about the symptoms, just that it is recurring and something he has had to learn to live with. Some have speculated it was recurring depression. We don't know. But in his letter to the early church in Galatia, he writes something which is a model for us in faith communities when he says: *“Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself”* -Galatians 4:14 (*Ibid*).

There are such angels of God everywhere around us in our lives. May we welcome them. For too long they have been treated with contempt or scorn. It is time to welcome them home. Next week, I continue with the sermon series, *“Depression: From the Pit of Despair We Can Rise to New Life.”* Please return and bring a friend – one of the angels of your life. Amen.

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