

“Blessed Are the Stigma Busters”

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

*23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 1:1-11; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33
Sermon Text: Corinthians 4:18*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

September 4, 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

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

A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 4, 2016, Proper 18, 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, dedicated to St. Teresa of Calcutta, to the Stigma Busters in church and society and always to the glory of God!

“Blessed Are the Stigma Busters”

5 of 5 in the sermon series

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

Jeremiah 1:1-11; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

II Corinthians 4:18

“... We look not at what can be seen, but what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary and what cannot be seen is eternal.”

+++++

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.

+++++

“For several years, she wrote about her bipolar disorder under a pseudonym. She described how she’d been hospitalized four times, twice since her first child was born. She explained how she went off her medication during both of her pregnancies and how each time — once as the mother of a

newborn and then again weeks into her second pregnancy — she was escorted from her home in police handcuffs, defiant.”

“She blogged to connect and reach other mothers grappling with mental illness. Ultimately, however, she decided that hiding her identity was actually perpetuating the shame long associated with mental disorders.”

“Even as her parents urged her not to, Jennifer Marshall in 2013 typed her real name on a blog post, hit publish and waited for the reaction. With those keystrokes, Marshall, who lives in Ashburn, Va., joined a growing community of people with mental illness who have chosen to out **themselves**. “It felt as though I was walking through life carrying this incredibly heavy secret,” said Jennifer. She felt a surge of strength as she shared her story. “It’s human connection,” she said. “When you find someone who has been able to overcome something that you’re struggling with, it’s really powerful.” (*Unwell and unashamed: The stigma of mental illness is under attack by sufferers, who are coming out publicly and defiantly*,” by Colby Itkowitz , The Washington Post, June 1, 2016).

On June 1st, in The Washington Post, Colby Itkowitz featured Jennifer and others like her in her story, *“Unwell and unashamed: The stigma of mental illness is under attack by sufferers, who are coming out publicly and defiantly.”*

They are part of a stigma busting movement. Some have compared this stigma busting movement for those battling brain diseases to the gay rights movement with its beginnings in personal revelation and story-telling. The groundswell to lift the stigma connected with brain diseases has had a multiplying effect accelerated by social media. The more people who “come out” about their mental illness and are met with acceptance, the more others feel it’s safe to do the same.

Since the beginning of 2016, millions have tweeted about their mental illness, many using established hash tags. For example, the campaigns **#imnotashamed** and **#sicknotweak** were tweeted 75,000 times and 139,000 times, respectively, since Jan. 1, according to an analysis from Twitter. The movement **#BellLetsTalk**, which began in Canada to “start breaking down the barriers associated with mental illness,” received 6.8 million tweets in January from all over the world.

While U.S. mental-health experts said there is not yet scientific data tracking the increase in voluntary disclosures of mental illness, social media has been employed so much to that end that a former Johns Hopkins professor is studying behavioral trends by mining tweets in which people talk explicitly about their mental illnesses. Glen Coppersmith said that he was initially surprised by how many people disclose that information online. Coppersmith’s Twitter analysis shows

that since 2014, hundreds of people a day have tweeted that they have received diagnoses of mental illness. *“Some of it is to end the stigma; some is an explanation of past behavior,”* said Coppersmith, who recently started a company, Qntfy, to analyze mental-health data.

He added that he “wholeheartedly” believes such disclosures have risen to the level of a movement.

The trend has been buoyed, experts say, by advancements in neuroscience that have enabled people to cast off stereotypes of mental illness as a personal failing and view it instead as the result of physiological changes in the brain that can be treated much like physical illnesses. *“We’ve become a much more sophisticated society about mental health,”* said Bernice Pescosolido, a professor at Indiana University and an expert in mental-health stigma. *“As people, we are opening up more about issues of race, issues of gender, issues of health generally. This is intertwined with the fabric of life”.*

But prejudice persists, particularly in the workplace, and Pescosolido and other experts say it remains to be seen whether the outpouring that is contained largely to social media will translate into advocacy and less discrimination in daily life. The stigma *“is still out there,”* Pescosolido said. *“I think it’s an*

opportunity. We've had a resurgence in the science; we've had a resurgence of people coming forward".

Names in this social media movement have begun to emerge in wonderful ways. **Sarah Fader**, who has a panic disorder, has co-founded the blog **Stigma Fighters** with **Allie Burke** who lives with schizophrenia. Their forum is for those who live with brain diseases. Hundreds of people have written pieces for the blog since its launch in March 2014. The origins of "Stigma Fighters" can be traced to early 2014 when she penned "*Fighting Against the Stigma of Mental Illness*" for the Huffington Post to describe her struggles. She described how others had belittled her for her illness, telling her that she was merely being "dramatic" or disparaging her use of antidepressants. Hundreds of people from all over the world sent her messages relating their own experiences with shame.

Amy Bleuel, who was depressed and plagued with suicidal thoughts most of her life, noticed the same phenomenon when she launched **Project Semicolon** in 2013. Her father died by suicide when she was 18, and she knew that he, like she, had felt alone in his illness. In April 2013, after a conversation with a friend yielded the idea, Bleuel tweeted a request for people to draw a semicolon on their wrists. **Amy says**, "People

with mental illness often think their lives are over. But the semicolon signifies that there's more to your story. Used by authors when they're not ready to end a sentence, the semicolon is fast rising as a symbol for this stigma busting movement." She continues, "*People want to know they're not suffering in silence. We want to have that discussion. We're done losing people to suicide; we're done not knowing what to do*".

The movement to lift the stigma is also changing how mental illness is portrayed in popular culture and the arts. In the FX Network show "You're the Worst," the audience came to know one of the main characters as a gregarious party girl with, yes, questionable morals. Then, in the second season, it is revealed that Gretchen Cutler's lifestyle is a diversion from recurrent depression. When it comes roaring back, she fears telling her boyfriend that "*my brain is broken.*"

That's what Rachel Griffin, a singer-songwriter in New York, had in mind when she embarked on writing a musical comedy about life in a psychiatric ward. In "*We Have Apples,*" the main character, Jane, is a young woman with severe panic disorder and depression. Throughout the show, another character portrays Depression — always hovering, sometimes controlling the conversation. Jane's symptoms worsen until she checks herself into a mental hospital. Griffin sees her show as doing for mental illness what "Rent" did for HIV/AIDS by

presenting complex characters who are more than just their illnesses. She started writing the show while riding the subway as an outlet for her depression and anxiety. “It’s about empowerment,” she said. Rachel Griffin, who has anxiety and depression, is a graduate student in music education at New York University. She started a twitter campaign, **#imnotashamed**, calling on people to disclose their mental illnesses and declare themselves unashamed.

Remember Jennifer Marshall - one of the key leaders of this stigma-busting movement? In 2013 she started “**This Is My Brave**,” which is now a stage show appearing around the country in which cast members tell their stories of mental illness, some for the first time. **Helen Dennis** is now in the show. She stands at center stage along with others under a spotlight sharing her stories of mental illness. Dennis isn’t sure what compelled her to audition for Marshall. But on that day, she said, the words poured out. “I’m a touch terrified because there is still such a strong stigma around it; there’s a lot of misinformation about it,” she said. “But I truly believe as people see co-workers and friends come out of the woodwork and be honest about this, it shows it can happen to anyone. You feel so alone when you’re going through the worst of it; to hear you’re not alone for me is revolutionary.” (All the stigma busting stories and much of the text above has been drawn

from “*Unwell and unashamed: The stigma of mental illness is under attack by sufferers, who are coming out publicly and defiantly,*” by Colby Itkowitz, The Washington Post, June 1, 2016).

The Stigma busting stories and leadership of **Jennifer, Amy, Sarah, Rachel, Helen, and Allie** are inspiring a new movement of people battling brain diseases. But, here we are in church and not one of these stories has been a traditional faith story. Yet I would contend that all of the stories have been God-stories. Each stigma buster has found their voice, shared their stories and burst forth in new life. Each stigma buster has had the courage to write, to act, to sing, dance, and speak about their brain disease. And as they have, each one has brought along others in this journey.

Ours should be no lament in relation to church and society on questions of stigma busting around brain diseases. After all, we are here today supporting one another in this stigma busting effort in the church! We are talking about this. We are trying to catch-up with those who have stepped ahead of us in this movement of stigma busting. And we are doing so with the founder of our faith as a guide in the process. As Jesus healed and taught, his was a movement which embraced love and saw the best in people. He was all about stigma busting himself. He challenged laws that made no sense and people

who made little sense in defending their laws. That is stigma busting.

As Judeo-Christian people, we have to overcome scriptural texts which declare demon-possession when we all know the symptoms are brain diseases of one sort or another. We need to forgive ancient writers who were doing their best thousands of years ago to define realities for which they had no “**diagnosis.**” We need to speak out when those with brain diseases are demonized – literally and figuratively. We need to read and reinterpret texts and parables -like the Prodigal Son - for a new day. We need to stay open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in the church and the world where people are **beginning to “come out”** about their struggles with depression and brain diseases.

Maya Angelou said it so well in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* - “*There is no great agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.*” We need to share our stories so that we end our agony and step into hope and new life.

I have received hundreds of emails from people over the past five weeks. One came following my first sermon from my friend Dan in Washington DC. He wrote:

Tim, I braced myself, expecting that this would be spiritually and emotionally exhausting to read. But it wasn't at all so. I think and

hope that bodes well for how it touched your congregation. Though the part about Paul's likely epilepsy was hard because that disease ruined my now-deceased college roommate. Thank you so much.

On Saturday morning, I went to the office to pick up some papers, a walk that takes me past a park where homeless people rest. A woman wearing a filthy t shirt stepped into my path and said "I'm Denisha, I'm 67 years old and I have no teeth. Can you help me get something to eat?" I said yes, if she would walk up the block with me to Subway.

*As we walked, I noticed she had an admission bracelet from DC general, and that she was greeting everyone in our path like a long lost friend, while forgetting who I was and what we were doing. At Subway, she ordered a tuna salad sandwich because it was the only thing she could chew with just her gums. As we walked out, I said goodbye and called her by her name. At this, she lit up, seized me, and gave me a wet toothless kiss on the cheek. After releasing me, she said **Remember Jesus**" before walking away. I paused for a few moments... For some reason, that pause helped her words sink in.*

God is always speaking, always giving us opportunities to worship and serve.

Love, Dan

As we come to God's Table of Grace, let us remember Jesus as Denisha and Jesus have called us to do. And let us also remember Denisha, Jennifer, Amy, Sarah, Rachel, Helen, Allie, and those who have entered our consciousness over the past five weeks: Sammy Bloom and Sam and Lois Bloom, Katie Shoener, and Ed and Ruth Shoener, Alan Johnson and Marti McMane, Jeff and Carol, Sarah Griffith Lund, Alicia Cohen, JK Rowling, Michael Phelps and Pablo Picasso. Let us remember our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, our children and grandchildren; our classmates, our friends, neighbors and co-workers who are hungering for justice in the stigma busting battle with brain diseases.

Let us always remember them so that we can sit with them, stand with them, be with them, listen to them, walk with them, advocate with them and fight for them. Blessed are the Stigma Busters. May we always remember. Amen.

Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC