

Sermon 17 November 2013

Luke 21:5-19

Mental Health and Generosity

Things are not what they seem. What seems permanent and beautiful will not last. Change is the only constant.

The spectacular amazing temple, symbol of all that is sacred in Judaism would be destroyed. People would be persecuted.

On this Mental Health Sunday...things are not what they seem. Someone appears 'normal', happy, but they are struggling with demons within, or voices, or the black dog or extreme anxiety, in other words, mental illness.

Correct Medication is a seemingly trial and error sort of thing, a matter of art as well as craft. Counselling may help. Healing is a messy business and society's attitude only makes it worse. Yet science and medicine and kindness and prayer, continue to make a difference in people's lives. We hang in there. We love. We hope. We accept. We are generous.

The theme for this year's mental health month is 'Kindness: little act, big impacts'.

Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and are able to make a contribution to their community. Mental illness, on the other hand, describes a number of diagnosable disorders that can significantly interfere with a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities.

Our ability to relate to family, friends, workmates and the broader community can be affected by our mental health. Mental illness can cause significant distress and disability, and can lead to isolation of, and discrimination against, those affected.

People with a mental health disorder may also not be able to fully participate in the labour force. This has individual impacts in terms of the person's income, social participation and self-esteem, and also has wider economic impacts. The **annual** cost of mental illness in Australia has been estimated at **\$20 billion**, which includes the cost of loss of productivity and labour force participation.

In 2007, almost half, (**45%**) of Australians aged between 16 and 85 years reported that they experienced mental illness at some time in their lives, that means almost half of us. Diagnosis of a mental disorder was met if someone had, at some point in their lifetime, experienced at least one of the selected mental disorders, that is, Anxiety, Mood (affective) or Substance Use disorders.

One-in-five (3.2 million) Australians had experienced symptoms in the **12 months** prior to interview. That is a lot of us.

<http://www.mentalhealth.asn.au/images/MHM%202013/kindness%20factsheet.pdf>

Just like your physical health and fitness, your mental health is worth taking care of and improving. This is true for everyone, regardless of whether they have or have not experienced mental illness.

Mental Health Sunday encourages all of us to think about our mental health and wellbeing. It's an opportunity to take a look at how we are feeling and focus on some of the things that can help us improve or maintain our mental health and wellbeing.

It's important to look after ourselves and each other and to treat each other the way that we would like to be treated. That's why kindness is so important, little acts, big impacts!

Kindness and generosity are essential to our mental health and wellbeing, both as givers and receivers.

When we practice kindness in our daily lives even the smallest act can make a real difference to the health and wellbeing of ourselves and those around us. Kindness also brings people closer. Sharing kindness with others is a great way to get to know people better and helps us build better relationships. That's what our, belonging and caring team envisages, that's what our holistic care nurse team practices.

It doesn't take much time or effort to practice kindness, just a little thought and imagination. So what are the simple things we can do to be kind to ourselves or someone else today. There are lots of creative ways to be kind!

How about:

- Write a letter or email to someone today letting them know what they mean to you and how much you appreciate them.
- Keep a list of things that you are grateful for. Aim to add at least one thing to the list every day, no matter how big or small.
- Ask for a hand when you need it. We all need help sometimes.
- When something good happens, try to make time to pause and celebrate.

... and I am sure you can think of others...

p214 Rachel Naomi Remen, in 'My Grandfather's Blessings' writes:

'We strengthen life anytime that we listen generously or encourage someone to find meaning, or wonder about possibility, or dream or hope or escape from self-judgement and inner criticism, or know that they matter. Anytime we share someone's joy, we bless the life in them.'

She tells the story of Jesse whose own life has not been easy. Nonetheless she is a celebrator. Although she has had many professional disappointments and two episodes of colon cancer, her joy in life is tangible.

Rachel says, 'I smile whenever I am in the same room with her. So does everyone else. She is always one of the first to celebrate someone's birthday, to remember anniversaries, to congratulate people on their successes, whether she knows them well or not. So Jesse is one of the first people to call when something good happens to you or someone you love. She is there to listen to the whole story with delight. Often when you finish talking to her you feel even better about what has happened, luckier than before.'

Rachel continues,

'Once when we were sitting together in a doctor's office, awaiting the lab results of her six-month chemotherapy checkup, I had asked her about her joy in life. Her own life had been so hard. Didn't she feel envious of others who had things she did not? She had smiled at the thought and shaken her head. "Then what is your secret?"

Suddenly serious, she had replied that it seemed to her that joy was not something personal. When I looked at her baffled, she explained she has found that if you are genuinely happy for them, people are very generous with their joy and share it with you openheartedly. "When something good happens to the person next to me, I am there to celebrate it with them. Their good luck makes me feel lucky. I rejoice with them about it as fully as if it was happening to me," she told Rachel. "It makes me really happy." She paused and looked thoughtful. "Of course, then it *is* happening to me," she said with a grin.

'When Jesse was first diagnosed, her cancer had spread beyond her bowel. Despite this, her surgeon had operated and removed as much of it as he possibly could, but he could not remove it all. "We need to keep her comfortable for as long as we can," he said. But that was fifteen years ago. It makes you wonder. **When you strengthen the life around you, perhaps you strengthen the life within you.'** concludes Rachel.

Gratitude and celebrating life, help us get through the hard times. Whether we are doing something kind for ourselves, receiving kindness from others or experiencing good fortune, if we practice receiving it with appreciation, enjoyment and gratitude, it can make a good thing even better.

Mental Health Sunday has special importance for those of us who have, or know someone who has, experienced mental illness. There are so many of us in this congregation.

Today is a time to celebrate the recovery journey and to think about the new meanings in our lives and what things would bring us greater life satisfaction.

It can also be a time to think about ways we can help to remove some of the barriers that prevent people living with mental illness from being able to enjoy active, engaged and stigma free lives.

(Things are not what they seem. Sometimes our deepest scars are hidden, and sometimes it is our peers who are the most help, that is why you are so important. Rachel Naomi Remen tells another story. This time of a retreat for people affected by cancer. It was a mixed group with people carrying many issues, which at first made the group prickly and unsafe. But as people began to tell their stories, things began to change. There was one young woman there who said not a word, and sat huddled up at the very edge of the room. At the very last session, people were talking intimately about their scars. The woman sitting next to the young woman, said 'you wouldn't know anything about that. Your sort of cancer doesn't leave scars.'

The young woman spoke very softly, 'I never show anyone my back.'

The woman beside her asked, 'why not?'

'I've got terrible scars. I was beaten badly as a child.'

Undaunted, and against all the rules, the woman asked, 'Who did that to you?'

The young woman replied, 'my mother'.

The older woman began to weep. Large tears trickled down her cheeks. The group sat in silence. Finally the young woman held out her hand and the older woman took it. 'Thank you' she whispered. 'Thankyou, Thankyou'.

Sometimes it is not professional help we need, but community, and the building of trust.....curing is the work of experts but strengthening the life of another is the work of human beings.)

In his poem, The Guest House, Jelaluddin Rumi writes:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.
-- Jelaluddin Rumi, translation by Coleman Barks

Jesus says, 'for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents
will be able to withstand or contradict.'

No matter what your situation, be kind to yourself, stop, breathe, and remember,
you are not alone, this community here, alongside our gracious generous God is
with you all the way. You only need to ask.

Things are not what they seem. All is going along so well, then someone key to
our community leaves. We have to regroup, think again, look to God, trust in the
God who is with us and knows every hair on our head.

Susanna Pain
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