

Series A, 4th Sunday after Epiphany
“Blessed are the Mentally Ill”

We gather today in the season Epiphany, the season in which we contemplate startling moments when Jesus is shown to be the Son of God. It is the season in which we remember the many profound ways in which Jesus brought light into the darkness of a broken world and drew to himself those who longed for authentic life.

This is also a day that our Synod has designated to highlight the issue of mental illness. Jesus longs to bring light to those in the darkness of mental suffering through the ministry of his people.

Today we hear Jesus pronounce blessing upon those their culture hardly considered blessed! It's very near the beginning of his ministry, and Jesus makes it clear that his mission is to proclaim the kingdom of God and to bless and invite even the little, the small, and the suffering into the joy of God's presence. In his day, as in ours, sufferers themselves were often blamed for their suffering. It was assumed that misfortune came to sinners. Jesus breaks that assumption by pronouncing blessing and offering comfort and hope to the poor, those who mourn, the meek, and all those who invite misfortune by standing on the side of the kingdom of God. Jesus was addressing real people, in real circumstances, facing real suffering, people who were not taken into account very much by those around them.

Mental illness is a common form of suffering in our time and place. One in five people in North America will have a mental health challenge in any one year. One in three people will face a mental health challenge over their lifetime. They

are real people, in real circumstances, facing real suffering, people who are not taken into account very much by those around them.

The suffering of those with mental illness has several facets. Many, but not all, of those who have mental illnesses have suffered trauma in their pasts. They have been misused, most often by family members or friends of the family. Trauma changes the brain. Mental illness is sometimes the result as victims do their best to cope with their experience.

The illness itself produces suffering. Those who cannot trust the thoughts of their own minds suffer. Those whose minds warn them of danger everywhere suffer. Those who are plunged into the pit of despair suffer. Those who are at the mercy of their compulsions to drink, take drugs or gamble suffer. Those who believe they are all-powerful one moment and who suddenly descend into darkness the next suffer. Those who believe that the world would be better off without them suffer.

And those with mental illness also face stigma and rejection from those around them. In the deep recesses of our minds, we, who consider ourselves healthy minded, may fear those who act in odd ways. We may suspect that they have been touched by evil, that their illness is contagious. We want to protect ourselves from possible violence, even though those with mental illness are much more likely to be the targets of violence than they are to act out violently themselves. Our rejection of those who are mentally ill reflects the rejection of our society. We allow the mentally ill to live on our streets and inhabit our prisons. They face punishment and do not receive the help they need.

There are different forms of mental illness, including complicated grief, anxiety, depression, addiction, bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia. These

illnesses have many causes – genetics, environmental exposure to toxic chemicals, social isolation, brain damage. Have any of you, your family or friends suffered with such a condition?

How might we think of responding to people with mental illnesses? How might we act ourselves when we experience pain this way? Complete the sentence, “Blessed are the mentally ill, for...” Here are some endings that I can think of: “For they shall see an end to rejection and stigma;” “For they shall be understood and valued;” “For they shall be welcomed into community;” “For they shall know the greatest physical, emotional and spiritual health possible.

For those with mental illness, several changes in individuals and our society will lead to thriving for individuals, their family and community. Awareness of the prevalence of mental illness in its many forms will reduce stigma. Education about the forms of mental illness, its many causes, and helpful ways to engage with those in crisis, will increase understanding. As we become more aware and understanding of mental illnesses, we will be more comfortable offering support to those who suffer and those who share their journeys.

You may wonder what our denomination is doing to bless those with mental illness. Our Synod has struck a Ministry Team to engage our congregations in conversation about the issue. The CARE Ministry Team (Congregational Action and Response for Mental Illness) strives to increase awareness, to educate members of churches, and to encourage churches to become places of welcome and support for those suffering the pain of mental illness within our congregations, and in the general community. The brochure that is included with today’s bulletin gives more information about their activities. We are all invited to become part of their mission.

Micah makes plain how God wants us to live, what to do, what “God is looking for in men and women”, to quote Eugene Peterson’s translation, The Message. “It’s quite simple,” Micah reports. “Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don’t take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.” (6:8) Jesus in the Beatitudes takes God seriously, announcing God’s kingdom to those who are the “little ones” of his time and place. Perhaps, if he were here today, Jesus would say, “Blessed are those with mental illness, for they shall know my embrace through the ministry of my servants.” Amen.