

“A Sickness Unto Death”

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San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

The sermon title “The Promise of Presence” was for a sermon almost completed that I’ll preach next Sunday. But the title fits today’s message as well because promise of presence is the promise of God with us and the promise of presence this church offers to each other and even to me as their pastor. I stand here today not because I am trying to be an “pastor that’s got it all together” and is untouched by grief but because who I am and what I do as a pastor is to try to make sense theologically and spiritually out of all life experiences. Any of our clergy would have preached for me today, but what has helped me the most the last few days has been the time allowed me to think and pray and try to discern the message of my brother’s suicide. So I thank you for giving me the gift of your presence and hearing my grief into speech for a few moments this morning.

My brother David’s suicide was not altogether unexpected, for he had been a troubled soul for several decades. Mental illness has not always been spoken of or understood as rooted in physiology and then sometimes compounded by the circumstances of one’s life. We knew of my brother’s illness for years and pleaded with him to get help. One of the hardest things about mental illness is that unlike physical illness, the person does not always recognize that they are sick. David thought there was nothing wrong with him. What might have been healed if treated earlier became for him a sickness unto death. My faith tells me that our loving God has received my brother into God’s self with great compassion and afforded him the peace my brother could not find here on earth.

Yet, I cannot end my spiritual reflections at this point; I feel there is more to recognize and more truth to acknowledge. To not do this would be to not fully honor my brother’s life. What can I learn? How can my experience be helpful to others? Besides my brother’s mental illness, there were other factors that haunted him. And as I tell this part of the story, there is no blame, no pointing of the finger, only compassion.

My brother and I grew up in a church very different than the one we have here. He learned of a Father God of judgment with very strict rules of right and wrong and no areas of gray. This Father God offered one way to salvation and if one didn’t measure up only damnation awaited. This understanding of God wasn’t all that unusual 50 years ago, as well as what church was meant to accomplish which was “make sure one toed the line in order to get to heaven.” It is a Christian faith typical of religion in the 1900s and for quite a few folks is the same today. Many people in these churches try hard to be their best for God, but often the consequences of these misguided biblical interpretations are devastating. One can also see why people choose to expand the language for God way beyond “Father God” since it has developed negative overtones for many people. Surrounding David was this spiritual environment to which he could never measure up; he could never be good enough. He also watched our father’s struggle with mental illness, which had to effect him. And my father’s struggles were both physical and also rooted in the same theology that held up a judgmental Father God meant to keep us safe and in control.

This brings me to the issue of parents and children. As parents almost all of us do our best for our children, but none of us is perfect. Parents can act in good faith and simultaneously encourage their children to take what is the best we offer and then to move far beyond us to their own place of fullness of life as the Divine One offers them. Probably more than my daughters would prefer, I admit my failures, my neurosis, my mistakes to them, and at the same time, remind them they do not need to repeat the past. Every moment has inherent possibilities for some-

thing new, something novel. Although on occasion the judgmental Father God tapes start rolling in my mind, through years of effort and therapy and finding this beloved community of the United Church of Christ that holds up a compassionate God who loves us as we are and as we would be, I have found peace and joy and comfort in my faith. Another important influence in my brother's life was the extent to which the systems, the powers and principalities of the culture can thwart ones ability to see any possible way out.

Because my brother feared a judgmental Father God, he married way too early because sex outside of marriage was condemned. (I'm not saying we should be promiscuous, just telling the story.) My brother was very intelligent, but marrying so young and having children right away inhibited his ability to complete his education and meant he worked menial labor that did not fulfill his soul. He decided his marriage was to blame and so he married twice and sought fulfillment in these relationships that could not complete him. He became complicit in the systems of culture that surrounded him; systems that discouraged therapy; a culture that had narrowly defined limits on what was right and acceptable; a culture that hid the truth and fostered secrecy. It seemed that whenever he got close to a breakthrough, the fear of living outside the system, living a new creation, was more than he could bear, and he retreated into familiar and life-denying patterns. It seems to me that we as a church have the important task of living outside the systems, the powers and principalities of this world. We at our best hold a mirror up so that those entangled in webs of destruction can see what is happening to them and then seeing may choose an alternative way.

I believe that of all God's attributes, God as the One who holds endless possibilities is worthy of our worship. We must herald endless possibilities; we must shout out words of hope; there must be a presence that is revealed to those living in sickness and desperation. And we as church are tasked with showing the world the promise of God's presence and compassion. Hopefully, we shine brightly enough that the possibilities are revealed. But when those possibilities are not enough, when the tangled web of life is too much to unknot, I believe that in that final breathe of life, God offers one more possibility and that is a home, a place of rest, the peace of God that passes all understanding.

Years ago I read this Jewish prayer for the dead and have used it in memorials, and I heard my brother's voice through it again this week:

When I die, if you need to weep, cry for someone walking on the street beside you. And when you need me, put your arms around others and give them what you need to give me. You can love me most by letting hands touch hands and souls touch souls. You can love me most by sharing your joys and multiplying your good deeds. You can love me most by letting me live in your eyes and your hearts and not in your mind. And when you say prayers for me, remember this: love doesn't die, people do. So when all that's left of me is love, give me away.