

First Presbyterian Church  
The Marks of the Church: Giving  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
May 1, 2022

Psalm 37:18-24; Acts 3:1-10

The writer of the books of Luke and Acts is an amazing storyteller. I say this because he does not simply retell what happened, but he adds drama to the events. We can see this in our morning's story. The story begins with Peter and John doing what good Jews living in Jerusalem did, they were going to the Temple for daily prayer. The scene is familiar. As the two disciples approach the gate into the Temple there are multiple beggars seeking alms. The beggars were gathered there because the entrance to the Temple was the perfect place to beg because Jews were called to share what they had with those in need, especially before they went to be in the presence of God. The lame man who, because of his disability, was unable to work and had to be carried to the gate was going through his daily ritual of asking for assistance. Luke, the storyteller, builds a sense of expectation when he describes Peter and John turning to the man and saying, "Look at us!" Readers will anticipate that something is about to happen. Will Peter and John give the man more money than he expected? Will Peter and John tell the man about Jesus? What will happen? The response is startling. First, they tell the man that they have no money to give...and so the reader is deflated. But then Peter does the unexpected, in the name of Jesus he gives the man the gift of mobility. "In the name of Jesus, get up and walk." And then the man not only gets up and walks, but he jumps, leaps and praises God. Everyone around them is filled with wonder and amazement. It's a great story but what are we supposed to do with it?

I ask this because chances are few of us have ever witnessed such a miracle. We may have heard of miracles, and we may have thought of the wonders of modern medicine as being miracles...which in my opinion they are. But we are people who live in an age of science, where miracles are no longer the norm. And chances are if we were to see someone in the same situation as the man at the Temple, we might give him some money, or see how we might give him some assistance, but we would probably not hold out our hands and tell him to walk in the name of Jesus. Which by the way, is part of our Reformed heritage. Calvin and other Reformers were clear that miracles were part of the early church, but that God no longer worked through them because there were other means of dealing with similar issues. So again, we would probably tell persons in need to seek a physician, or a social-safety net organization to assist them. Diseases are not miraculously cured, except...except...for one kind of illness, which 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians often believe can be instantaneously solved by prayer, determination, and will. And that is mental illness.

I have been fascinated by the church and its response to mental illness. What I have witnessed is that mental illness is not really seen as an illness like heart disease or diabetes. Instead, mental illness, meaning everything from depression, to bi-polar disorder, and multiple other diagnoses have been treated like nothing more than a failure of the will of the individual. And that if the individual merely thinks more positively, prays to Jesus, or has people pray over them, then everything will be fine. And if it is not, then the fault lies with the individual. This can be seen in a couple of ways; first in the rise of what is called Biblical Counseling. Many of the degrees that are offered in this area are nothing more than teaching pastors which scripture verses to offer those in need, believing that by reading the Bible the person will be cured. The second way I have witnessed this is in the anti-psychiatric and anti-therapy movement in many churches, where psychiatrists and psychologists are seen as the enemies of faith because...and this critical...there is no such thing as mental illness. But the truth is that mental illness is a real illness. It is physiological. And those wrestling with mental illness need treatment, love, support, and

acceptance. And so the question becomes, what can we give those suffering from mental illness? What can we offer them as Peter and John offered wellness to the man at the gate?

Before I answer that question, I want to tell you why I am speaking about mental illness this morning. I am doing so for a variety of reasons. First, we call ourselves Everybody's Church where all are welcome. Yet I know that for many people struggling with mental illness they are not comfortable sharing with others, even in this place, about their struggle. In other words, they are not able to be their true selves in our midst. And if we are to be Everybody's Church then we need to be a place where all persons can freely be their true selves. Second, I am doing so because the Diversity, Inclusion, and Justice Committee of the Session has been learning about and wrestling with how we can be a place where people dealing with mental illness can find a home. Third, I am doing so because it is personal. It is personal because depression runs in my family. My grandmother suffered from it; my mother suffered from it; and one of my brothers and I suffer from it. And if there is one thing I learned from my mother's experience with depression is that there is a stigma to mental illness and so rather than speak about it we are to hide our illness because of the fear of what others might say about us. So again, the question becomes, as Everybody's Church, what can we offer to those wrestling with mental illness? The answer, I believe, is that we can offer a safe space in which they can be themselves and be open about their illness. There are many ways to do this, but I will offer three.

First, we can create an assumption free space. What I mean by this is that we tend to assume that we know what other people are going through. We pretend that maybe because we have felt down or blue or had a bad day that we know what it is like to have deep and profound depression. We assume that we can have empathy and share others' feelings, but we can't. This reality was brought home to me by a speaker who has bipolar disorder. The speaker said that even he cannot understand what another person who has bipolar disorder is going through. So we are challenged to set aside our assumptions and simply listen, love, and learn.

Second, we can create a paternalistic free space. What I mean by this is that many of us, both men and women, pretend that we know what someone else needs and how they ought to treat themselves. We know someone who has done well on one medication, so we tell others they ought to take it. We know someone who has been helped by a particular kind of therapy and so that is the cure for what ails everyone. When we do this, what we are actually doing is robbing those struggling with mental illness of their agency. We are treating people as if they are not capable of making informed decisions about their care and treatment. So, we are challenged to set aside our tendency to give advice and simply listen, love, and learn.

Third, we can create a stigma free space. Again, we don't want to believe that we bring a sense of stigma into our conversations about our relationships with those dealing with mental illness. But I want you to answer a couple of questions for me. First, would you feel more comfortable saying I have spinal stenosis, or I have bipolar disorder? Second, would you feel more comfortable saying I have a-fib or I have Schizophrenia. Can you feel the difference? See, many of us have internalized stigma against mental illness. So, our challenge is to set aside our tendency to stigmatize mental illness and simply listen, love, and learn.

Like Peter and John, we are called to give what we can to those in need. In some cases, it is money. In others, it is our time. And in this case, I believe that we are called to create a safe space for all persons struggling with mental illness as well as all other issues that negatively impact lives. If you want to think more deeply about this issue, I recommend the book Hiding in the Pews by Steve Austin. We have some copies in the hallway. My challenge to all of us then is to consider how we can create a safe space for all people, and on this day, especially for those struggling with mental illness, so that we can truly be Everybody's Church.