

2022 05 22 – Love One Another

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-25 (The Inclusive Bible)

Mental Health Sunday is a relatively new day of remembrance and affirmation created by The United Church of Canada. According to our national church's website, "Mental Health Sunday is part of the church's effort to create communities of radical belonging for all people, including those living with mental health challenges." <https://united-church.ca/worship-special-days/mental-health-sunday>

As I have prepared for this Sunday, one of things that has become really clear to me is the wide variety of conditions that are included under the umbrella of mental health. Let's see how many we can name. When I say mental health challenges what comes to your mind? (depression, suicide, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, substance use, addiction, historic and generational trauma (PTSD), grief, eating disorder / Neurodiversity (normal variations in the brain): autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and other learning disorders).

So why do we need a Mental Health Sunday? We don't have a Physical Health Sunday or Emotional Health Sunday? Why Mental Health? One of the biggest issues that we have to deal with when we talk about mental health is the stigma that is associated with it. In the not too distant past, it was normal practice to put people suffering from a mental illness in institutions for long periods of time, even for life. In fact, yesterday I officiated at a graveside service for Dean Evans, a man who lived with severe autism. Dean spent 54 years of his life at the Valley

View Centre in Moose Jaw. That institution finally closed its doors less than three years ago in September of 2019.

The stigma exists for all types of mental illness and neurodiversity and has led to an environment of shame, secrecy and silence. This is true for everyone, but it is especially true for men. For example, men have a suicide rate three times higher than women. Why? We have socialized men to be strong, stoic and self-reliant. They have been told that showing emotion is a sign of weakness, as is asking for help. <https://www.buddyup.ca/about/>

In today's scripture reading Jesus is talking to his disciples on the night before his death. They are in the midst of their last supper and Jesus has just announced that Judas is going to betray him. Judas leaves the room and then Jesus says, "My little children, I won't be with you much longer." You can only imagine what his disciples are feeling: pain, grief, fear, anger, and despair. I wonder, are they holding it in, or did their first century, middle-eastern culture allow them to show their emotions?

Jesus realizes what a difficult time this will be for his closest followers and so he tells them, "I give you a new commandment: Love one another. And you're to love one another the way I have loved you. This is how all will know that you're my disciples: that you truly love one another." Jesus knows this is the only way they are going to get through the difficult times ahead. They will need to love each other despite their differences, despite their weaknesses, and through their upcoming challenges. They will need to support each other as he supported them.

Jesus' commandment goes way beyond those eleven disciples. We are all followers of Jesus and we are called to love one another. We are called to love one another whether we are sick or healthy. We are called to love one another in all of our diversity. We are called to love all of God's children including ourselves.

This week CBC had an article on their website describing a program in Alberta called buddyup. How many of you are already familiar with buddyup? This is a program that encourages men to help other men by paying attention to the clues that something may be wrong with a family member, a friend or colleague. And then starting and continuing a conversation in the hopes of getting to their truth. The signature line is "Hey Bob, how are you really doing?" I invite you to check it out at buddyup.ca <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/buddy-up-centre-suicide-prevention-mental-health-1.6458747>

This week I also read the story of David Boyd, a United Church minister in B.C. who has struggled with his mental health. In his blog he wrote:

2010 was a seminal year for me. I turned 50, our youngest child went off to university, and I took a leave of absence for depression. During my treatment while on leave, I realized—finally admitted to myself—that I'd suffered depression all of my life...

...There were two conversations that prompted me to go on Restorative Care leave. A colleague raised some concerns about my mental health in a private conversation. Also, a member of my congregation—a doctor—asked me whether I'd been diagnosed with depression. I talked things

over with my spouse and we decided that I'd consult my family physician. <https://united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/desert-gives-life>

During his leave of absence Rev. Boyd tried various therapies and he noted, "What was helpful to me was talk therapy, meditation, exercise, cultivating space in my life, and speaking to a spiritual director." He also described how a spirit-filled experience in the desert helped him realize he was not alone. This is a perfect example of how two caring individuals (or buddies) helped their colleague and minister to search out the help he needed to improve his mental well-being.

Chronic, serious mental health challenges can lead to loneliness and isolation. Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund, of The United Church of Christ, shares her own and her family's experiences saying,

It can feel shameful to feel so lonely. We can wonder if there is something wrong with us, if anybody likes us or even cares about us. We can feel unloved and unlovable. Living with mental health challenges impacts our sense of belonging because loneliness makes us feel like we don't belong. <https://united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/jesus-heals-people-through-relationships>

We all need to know that we are not alone. Jesus calls us to love one another. Let us live out that call by reaching out to someone who needs a friend, someone who may be struggling to reach out for themselves.

Yesterday, as I stood at Dean's graveside with his sister and two brothers, we acknowledged the fact that treatments and therapies for autism have advanced greatly in the last 60 years and we wondered what Dean's life would have been like had he been born in this century. Would he have been able to live a fuller

life, closer to his family? Would he have been able to experience more of what this world has to offer?

It is true that the stigma of mental illness and neurodiversity is beginning to decrease. But there is still much work to do to re-educate ourselves and to reach out to those who are too often treated as “the other.”

Yes, God is truly “making everything new,” but this new realm of love and peace and justice is happening through us. It is happening one hug, one phone call, one person at a time. May it be so. Amen.