

May 15, 2022

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be her peoples, and God herself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>she will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup>And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also she said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup>Then she said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

John 13:31-35

<sup>31</sup>When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Child of Humanity has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in Godself and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ <sup>34</sup>I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

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The month of May is Mental Health month and in the United Church of Christ this Sunday is Mental Health Sunday. In the church we too often think our focus must be on the spiritual, not the physical world, even though God incarnated in Jesus is very physical. Mental illness is often placed in the spiritual realm; the realm of evil spirits and demons. Modern medicine has helped us

see just how physical mental illness is, often due to chemical imbalances in our brain.

A fair question from you might be, “But why are we focusing on mental illness? We are healthy, or at least within the range of acceptable.” I am less concerned about your mental health, than I am about clarifying how we, as individuals and a congregation, can be aware and prepared to help those we encounter, who are struggling with mental health issues.

What is our responsibility, as followers of Jesus Christ, to help those suffering from mental illness? Today’s scripture passages help lay the foundation for our Christian response. Honestly, the Book of Revelation is a difficult book to work with, but its ending is our hope, our goal. This ending is telling us that by living what we learn in the scriptures about Jesus and his teachings, we help create a new heaven, new earth.

The single most important teaching of Jesus is found in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” Now, to be honest, on the surface this is not a new commandment. God’s steadfast love for us is found all through Hebrew Scriptures, especially in The Psalms. And more than God’s steadfast love is there, we are told to love one another.

But Jesus adds, love “just as I have loved you.” Jesus’s love is a little different. In Jesus, and his teachings, we see a love that is welcoming, healing, unconditional. And, as unconditional, it is a love that knows no borders, which means we are to love not only those related to us or part of our tribe or nation, but each person, including our enemies. We know this to be true, because Paul saw Jesus’s love as border-crossing – no Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. And Peter welcomed the Gentile into the community, despite the Jews who were trying to keep it tribal.

As nice as this sounds and feels, Jesus telling his disciples, telling us, to love one another, as beloved, is a very difficult challenge to live out, especially when we are confronted with someone suffering from a mental illness. Things have gotten better for the

mentally ill, thanks to modern medicine, but it is still hard to overcome the historical prejudices around mental illness.

For millennia we have used words like crazy, nuts, idiot, “mental”. Biblically we said someone was “demon possessed”, when someone uncontrollably fail into fires or had a violent psychotic episode. Depression or migraine headaches were curses; someone had wronged God.

Our treatment of people suffering from some forms of mental illness has gotten better. We sympathize with those suffering from depression. We are accepting of people suffering from OCD (we even know the words for the initials – obsessive compulsive disorder). And the list of “acceptables” continues to grow: ADD, ADHD, bipolar, autism. But, what we are now learning about our brains continues to evolve and what we are learning is harder for people to accept and sympathize with.

Addiction is a mental health issue. It is a mental illness. We now know some people’s brains are hardwired to by-pass their impulse control. They just cannot stop. Some drugs change the brain’s physical make up, making one unable to resist taking the drug. It is just not as easy as saying, “Just stop drinking!” “Just say, ‘No.’ to drugs!” “Stop looking at your phone all the time!”

Addiction is multi-faceted: Substances, gambling, gaming – each person is different, not everyone is susceptible. One person might only be susceptible to one addictive substance or activity, others might have multiple addictions.

As frustrating and irrational as mental illness can be, we must be willing to love those around us who are suffering from a mental health issue, and this love must be concrete. This does not necessarily mean accepting a person and their behavior as they are, rather we are to love them as they are, so that they might become who God wants them to be.

Our love begins with recognizing those around us who might be silently suffering from a mental illness. There are five signs people struggling with a mental health issue have. They are:

- there is a personality change
- they are often agitated
- they are withdrawn
- they exhibit poor self-care
- they present as feeling hopeless

Not all five need to be present. One is enough as warning. If you suspect someone is struggling with some kind of mental health issue, you can try to be a little more welcoming, sympathetic, caring, but do not be smothering or pushy. Leave them room to respond to your overture, if they wish. One can be supportive with just a smile, a kind word, a willingness to listen.

It is very important not to be judgmental or shaming. This can be very hard, when being supportive of a person living with an addiction.

We can also advocate for better mental health care. There is a major gap in mental and physical health care funding. Insurance companies underpay non-profit agencies and clinicians offering counseling and other support services to the point some clinics are having to close. There is a national shortage of psychiatric doctors and the ones still working are not willing to work at non-profit agencies as the pay is radically lower than in private practice.

Most important, out of love, we need to care enough to be aware, and, if “we see something, we need to say something” – to the person who appears to be hurting or to someone who might be able to help.

We must get over the stigma of mental health, mental illness being something we don’t talk about. Ignoring it or being silent about it only adds to the sufferer’s shame.

In and through love, Jesus healed body, mind, and spirit. His healing brought new life, a new world to the one he healed.

We are called to do the same. Amen.