

Let's Talk About...Mental Health
Psalm 69:1-13, 13-17
Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager – September 18, 2022

Save me, O God,
for the waters have come up to my neck.

²I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.

³I am weary with my crying;
my throat is parched.

My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.

¹³But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord.
At an acceptable time, O God,
in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.

With your faithful help ¹⁴rescue me
from sinking in the mire;
let me be delivered from my enemies
and from the deep waters.

¹⁵Do not let the flood sweep over me
or the deep swallow me up
or the Pit close its mouth over me.

¹⁶Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good;
according to your abundant mercy, turn to me.

¹⁷Do not hide your face from your servant,
for I am in distress—make haste to answer me.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I first met my friend Nic my freshman year of college. We both liked music and philosophy and debating about religion. Nic liked to run too, which I didn't quite get. Like just running? Why do that?

About a month in, as we were walking to lunch one day, Nic asked if we could pause. And there, he told me that he suffered from pretty severe bi-polar depression. I didn't know what to make of it in that moment, and just kept walking on, saying something like, "I'm sorry."

In the next couple of weeks, he shared a little bit more. He was beginning to miss classes. It was hard to wake up in the morning, or really anytime. And he had lots of thoughts about hurting himself. One day he rolled up his sleeves and showed me the markings on his arm. This wasn't a new thing.

About a week after that, a friend stopped me in the hall. She told me that Nic was just admitted to the hospital. He tried to really hurt himself this time.

That night, I called Nic's cell phone. And to my great surprise, Nic picked up the phone. I don't remember exactly what I said to Nic that night, or in the days or weeks that followed. But we talked for about an hour. He shared very honestly what he was experiencing and thinking about doing.

I did not understand. My experience of these first few weeks of college were so different. And so, my initial action, was to try to fix it. Try to solve it. Give advice after advice. And I did that for a long time, thinking, if Nic just stays positive, if he just exercises more, or is with people more, or reads cheerful books then that will solve it all.

I also thought or hoped for a linear progression. About a year later, I saw real progress. And then a few months after that, things were not as good. I wanted Nic's health and well-being to be on my schedule.

When I look back on those first few years of friendship, I almost wince at my not only naivete, but my demanding that his health get better on my terms. When I look back, I realize what was most helpful wasn't any advice I give or solutions I

offered. It was simply continuing to be a friend. Being someone to grab coffee with, to pick up the phone, to visit and listen and hang out meant the world.

And luckily, I was not the only one. Nic's family and close friends listened and loved and kept showing up. They also very wisely connected Nic with a great counselor who would listen, and a medical side that worked to get him helpful medicine.

Sadly, in the church world, we have for far too long viewed mental health concerns as something to overcome with simple will power or thinking positively. Even when we recommend prayer, we minimize the pain and heartache and struggle. And we leave medicine out of it. Medicine is hard. It has side effects, and it takes lots of work to find one that works right. But I've seen firsthand how it has saved a friend.

But most of all, I think what saved Nic, and has led him to being such an incredible friend and husband and brother and thoughtful, caring human being he is today and gift in my life, is that he felt safe to open up and share. His honesty and vulnerability I think is what ultimately saved his life.

I've learned a lot of things from Nic. But maybe most of all, what I've learned is that mental health cannot stay in the shadows. It cannot be a topic we avoid or decline to talk about, especially in the church. 20% of adults in our country deal with mental health issues. A quarter of those are acute, serious struggles. And for our youth, it is 1 in 6. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth and young adults.

To be a community that loves and welcomes and walks with and cares for our children, youth, and adults in all we are going through, we need to talk about this. We need to listen to this. We need to pull this out of the shadows.

This past week, I had a chance to sit down and talk with Rev. David Finnegan-Hosey. He is the new pastor at Bon Air Christian. And he has written a couple of books on church and mental health, including one that is the story of his own time as a patient on a psych ward called, "Christ on the Psych Ward." If we ever want a

training on first aid care for mental health, h would love to come and offer that for us.

In that conversation, I asked David, if you could share one message with us this Sunday what would it be? David answered, "The church needs to be okay with getting uncomfortable. We need to welcome tough stories, pain, illness, and not shy away from them. We need to be okay hearing these stories and pain and not being able to fix them or solve them right away."

I know that sounds easy. But in practice is so hard and difficult. Because we are people who want to fix and solve things. We are people who lean towards wanting our services and time together to always be joyful and happy and cheery. We especially want stories and lives with neat, linear progression. It doesn't come easy to us to join with others in the valley of darkness.

But joining people there is what love looks like. It's how Christ lived his life. It's where Jesus chose to go and meet others. It's where God continues to say to our brothers and sisters, parents, and children today and tomorrow, "I will be with you there."

Our Psalm for today is also a reminder that God does not want us hiding ourselves, and keeping parts of ourselves out of church, out of relationship with God. God says, "bring it all to me. I can handle it. I want to meet you in it all." The earliest followers of God knew that. That's why there are so many psalms of lament. So many words crying out with real visceral language of pain and distrust, injustice, and fear, of tears and not knowing where to go. It's why Jesus was able to honestly and without reservation say, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Our first step for mental health is not for us to pretend to have all the answers. It is not to be able to solve things right away. It is for us to get uncomfortable with the uncomfortable. It's for us to welcome the conversation, without judgment. It is for us to welcome pain and struggle and all the messiness. And for us to be there and listen, and to say maybe just, "I love you. Let's meet again later this week."