

Loving in a Dangerous Time

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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25 or so years ago, I had returned from a traumatic internship experience and was just about ready to abandon my call to ministry. My theological college gently encouraged me to take an extra practicum; a stint at a local long term care facility learning to be a chaplain.

I recall so much learning from that internship. But I also saw so much frailty, and connected with my own frailty. Debriefing with my supervisor one afternoon, Mary set her mug gently on the table between us.

She said, very quietly, "This mug is chipped."

She pointed to a number of chips and blemishes, then said:

I love this mug so much because it is like me.

Broken; chips and blemishes. God loves me in my brokenness.

I think we all have someone we love who has a mental illness, if we ourselves don't cope with it. I manage daily with ADHD, Attention Deficit Disorder. The more I understood it, and with support around me, I was able to manage. I had to see myself as unique, a child of God; my strengths and my frailties.

The United Church of Canada invites us this week to create radical belonging; intentionally inclusive spaces, not just in worship, but every aspect of our community. We are invited to allow God's dream of radical inclusion to live out through our relationships, especially with those who struggle, and need community.¹

Can we resolve anew to shed light on, dismantle, systemic racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia?

Imagine for a moment God's kin-dom coming among us today: everyone is welcomed, loved, respected, their uniqueness celebrated. That might be a chaotic, spontaneous space – filled with love. Imagine, people with different abilities not being shushed in worship because they talk or yell or cry.

Have you known someone like King Saul in today's story? Strong, brave, sharp – but, something changes – that person we love begins to struggle with anger, or paranoia, perhaps their sense of reality is very different from what we might call normal.

Seeing Saul through the lens of mental illness has offered me an opportunity to reflect on him, not as a marginal character giving rise to King David, but I see here a person who is suddenly afflicted. The Bible calls it an evil spirit, was it paranoid schizophrenia, or Bipolar Disorder? We are oh so human and fragile. But we are loved by God, unique and broken as we are. So many strong, brilliant people among us yearning to feel that they belong as they live with mental illness.

¹ There is a great resource published by both The United Church of Canada and The United Church of Christ Mental Health Network, entitled: *Radical Belonging: A Mental Health Sunday Resource for All*, found at <https://united-church.ca/sites/default/files/2021-04/radical-belonging.pdf>

Seeing through this lens of mental illness, we see young, tough, musician David soothing Saul's soul. Young David, who idolized the King, cared for his friend. Some of us might relate to Saul in his vulnerability, his utter humanity, others of us relate to David, sharing his gift in love.²

A wonderful, gifted, chaplain at the Kirkwood site of the hospital, Jeff Archambeault, graciously invited me to join him in bringing music to residents with various mental health challenges. It is something to see people who seem to have disappeared come to life when they hear music that touches them. Other caregivers listen, read to, sit in silence with, and are present with someone living with mental illness. They create community in that sacred space. Christ is there.

Caregiving love can be dangerous, though. We hear elsewhere in 1st Samuel that King Saul is enraged and throws a spear at young David. Singing to long term residents at the Kirkwood site with Jeff, I almost got clocked by a woman whom I wrongly thought was asleep as I walked by her.

Jeff took it as a teachable moment, saying to me, "Dave, watch out, she's got a good left hook."

As we create community for one another, being present for one another living with mental illness, God is there. It can be risky, not knowing exactly what to do, to say. But love, and holy listening, guides us as we are vulnerable.

The Bible is full of stories that speak of moments of mental suffering, but reaching out and caring. I think of the story of two women coping with grief. Naomi and her husband had to flee their homeland for Moab. Naomi's two sons married women from Moab. Naomi's husband and her sons die. Naomi plans to go to her home, tells the daughters-in-law to go to their families. One leaves. The other, Ruth was her name, declares:
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.³

Coping with loss, they find new life in this companionship. Community for one another, as they journey through grief.

Mary of Magdala in the Gospel of Luke is described as having "seven demons"⁴ cast out of her – presumably by Jesus. Were demons literal, or ancient words for some condition we know today as a mental illness? Perhaps a better question is – how were Jesus and his disciples a healing presence with her through her affliction?

You might ask; how did it turn out for Mary? Mary became part of the Jesus Community, and was with Jesus in his time of greatest vulnerability. She was also the first "disciple" to meet Jesus, alive, outside his tomb.

In God's kin-dom vision, mental illness is not defined as some disorder. Instead, people coping with mental illness are welcomed, made to feel they belong, loved.

² There is a helpful exploration of this story of Saul (coping with mental illness) and David (caregiver) by Ephraim Radner @ <https://www.wycliffecollege.ca/blog/anguish-mental-illness>

³ Ruth 1:16–17

⁴ Luke chapter 8, verses 1-3

Radical community – chaotic, unpredictable, even risky at times. That's what God's love looks like.