

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Wednesday, July 6, 2016
Finding Wholeness and Healing

We are continuing our summer series on prophetic witness. Today, I offer this prophesy: “Wholeness and healing is always possible.” In another ministry setting, I once sat in on the opening of our staff meeting when one staff member shared with the rest of us that she had just been diagnosed with metastatic cancer. She had been given a prognosis on only two – six months of life expectancy. She was obviously distraught and in shock. We all shared her shock. The amazing part was that this diagnosis was made on the basis of a medical test when something suspicious had shown up during a routine medical visit. The staff person was not experiencing any physical symptoms. Based on my previous work in holistic health, I suggested that my colleague practice an affirmation. These were the words I offered: “In this moment I am whole and healthy.” She seemed to be able to engage this affirmation since it was entirely true. Had she not been told the test results, she did in fact feel whole and healthy. She has told me how useful this affirmation has been for her for the almost four years during which she has never been cured of her cancer, but neither has she met the short life expectancy originally diagnosed. Living moment by moment, she has remained whole and healthy even as she has experienced a number of physical setbacks and challenges.

Today, we are lifting up the role of mental illness in our own faith community and in our broader community. We are applying the same prophesy: “Wholeness and healing is always possible.” Please keep in mind that when struggling with health or mental health concerns, the person struggling does not always feel whole and does not always feel as though they are healing. The prophesy is only true when it is applied powerfully in the present moment. And it may only be true when it can be embraced moment by moment in a community of care.

You have heard one very powerful story of dealing with mental illness from Gwen Williams. She has shared her journey with mental illness, with sexual abuse and with her faith. I am particularly grateful to Gwen who has been a significant teacher to me during the last five or six months when we have been meeting together on a one-on-one basis. Our time together has been of great mutual benefit.

Gwen Williams also suggested today’s scripture passage. Here are Gwen’s words from an email she sent me a few weeks ago: *“The woman who was hemorrhaging who touched Jesus’s robe is the best text because of the stigma and shame the society had about the bleeding and being unclean. She was not even able to vocalize and ask for what she needed, but Jesus’ reaction of needing to stop and acknowledge the woman and respect her when he realized someone had touched him. It is similar to the stigma and shame of mental illness and the silence of the ill. The focus of that passage is usually on the faith of the woman, but I think*

(says theologian Gwen Williams) the stigma-breaking of respect is the most important. Think about it."

I have thought about it and I agree. In today's scripture passage, we are told that the hemorrhaging woman had been bleeding for twelve years. We are also told "though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her". Mental illness in our society today is looked upon similarly to the way in which the hemorrhaging woman was looked upon during Jesus' time. Both are treated as outcasts, being deeply impacted by stigma. Both require all the financial resources that are available in order to attempt to control the disease if not cure it. Both require amazing faith in the midst of the most difficult of life circumstances.

This faith community was also enriched by the Adult Conversation last May where we heard a presentation from a speaker, Al Levin, from the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI). NAMI is a tremendous resource for communities of faith to truly extend a healing ministry to people dealing with mental illness. The NAMI presentation identified the following ways in which stigma is experienced: shame, negative attitudes, stereotypes, prejudice, misunderstanding, discrimination, indignity, hopelessness and isolation. Please recognize that all of these devastating effects are caused by the stigma and are not caused by the illness itself: shame, negative attitudes, stereotypes, prejudice, misunderstanding, discrimination, indignity, hopelessness and isolation.

Jesus calls us to a ministry that breaks through societal based stigmas. Jesus calls us to a ministry of healing. As I look toward the end of my interim ministry time together with all of you, it is my hope that a ministry of education, a ministry of understanding, and a ministry of care around persons dealing with the challenges of mental illnesses will continue here at Edina Morningside Church, long after my time with you ends.

The devotional words also read this evening from Rev. Mary Luti, speaks to how we do not need to separate ourselves out from those who are ill and those who are well, we do not need to separate ourselves out from those who have mental illness and those of us not diagnosed or not experiencing the depth of the troubling symptoms of mental illness. As Mary Luti says, *"The truth about human beings is that we're (all) broken. The larger truth is that we (all) heal. The even larger truth is that we heal each other. We have the power, often by the simplest of acts, to help each other heal."*¹

Mary provides additional insight into the nature of a simple act when she says: *"The miracle is that one person decides not to stand aloof from another person's pain."*²

Mary's concluding words guide us as a faith community: *"And he gathered the church as a circle of care...It's how we heal—by the company we keep."*³

¹ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_how_we_heal

² http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_how_we_heal

³ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_how_we_heal

May we be willing to exercise our power to help each other heal. May we decide day by day not to stand aloof from another person's pain. May we be a circle of care and heal one another by the company we keep. In so doing, may we find wholeness and healing. May it be so. Amen.