

Sermon for Mental Health Sunday

John 8:21-32

“Keep it One Hundred”

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As an African-American there are several aspects of my community and culture that I have great appreciation for – the interconnected community that reaches beyond blood relation to create new networks of kinfolk; the spiritual foundation that has deep roots in our past and who we are as a people; the resilience that we have to survive in the face of insurmountable oppression and injustice. I also value the importance of truth telling in the African-American community. Speaking the truth, being candid and telling it like it is are important within the frameworks of communication and interpersonal relationships that bind African-Americans together as a people. As I write this I can fondly hear the voices of grandmothers and teachers saying, “Baby, you better tell me the truth.” I hear the voices of wise sages and seasoned saints saying, “Don’t you dare lie to me.” I hear the voices of church mothers shouting out, “Tell the truth and shame the devil!” I can hear Aesop’s fables speaking the truth in story form to children and babes from an early age. The importance of truth telling in the African-American community is evidenced in common phrases such as “that ain’t no jive,” “tell the truth, Ruth,” “keep it real,” and in more recent pop culture “keep it one hundred.” These phrases rise to the surface and permeate the culture across generations.

Perhaps there is something about hearing and speaking the truth that has depth of meaning to a people who through the ages have worked hard to redefine the truth of who they understood themselves to be as full human beings created in the *Imago Dei*,

with their ebony hued selves. Perhaps there is something about giving voice to one's own lived experience, which often runs counter to the alternate narrative being spun by others from outside of the community that rings false in the soul of its subject. And yet, as with any community, there are often exceptions that muddy the waters of the very values its members lay claim to as most significant. Such is the case with the value placed on truth. As much as members of the African-American community keep it one hundred with regard to a plethora of issues, the truth of the matter is that when it comes to the subject of mental illness, a condition that impacts a person's thinking, feeling or mood, the premium on truth telling dissipates. Instead the flight behaviors of ignoring and avoiding often prevail. Buying into the myths, stigmas, fears, shame, misinformation, mistrust and denial that abounds around mental illness and its presence in and impact on the African-American community is commonplace.

Though measurable data and proven research exists, the difficulty of embracing the truth that African-Americans are 20% more likely to experience serious mental health problems than the general population, according to the Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, is real. The difficulty of embracing the truth that roughly one fourth of African-Americans seek mental health care and treatment as compared to 40% of whites, is real. The difficulty of embracing the truth that one in five Americans live with a mental illness is real. Though these and other relevant issues are live and in living color in our communities there continues to be resistance to keeping it one hundred when mental health is the topic of conversation. The truth of mental illness becomes secondary to the

fallacy that it does not exist in the lives of the very people that long to live whole, free and meaningful lives.

The ministry and message of Jesus, however, offers some insight about the value of knowing the truth, and the freedom that emerges from such knowledge. The interior of the text outlines a situation in which there is a dispute about who Jesus is. Based on the truth of his ministry and message many people, particularly the Pharisees and teachers of the law feel threatened. Others experience confusion. Still others are skeptical. "Who are you?" the people ask. Inquiring minds want to know. Who is this Jesus to challenge the status quo? Who is this Jesus to refer to himself as the Son of Man? Who is this Jesus to say that he speaks the words of God? Jesus provides them with the answer to their questions. He says "I am from above...I am not of this world...when you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will know that I am he..." The people, however, just can't seem to grasp what he is saying. Jesus keeps it one hundred with them, telling them who he is. He has been telling them who he is from the beginning, and he has most certainly demonstrated his identity as the Son of God through countless gracious acts of love, kindness and healing. All of the signs were there, but yet it proved difficult for the people to lay hold to the truth that was right in front of them.

The truth can be a difficult concept to grasp when the information being presented is not easily understood. The truth can be hard to comprehend when the hearer has no point of reference with which to understand it. The truth can be challenging to accept when the essence of it threatens some aspect of the essence of the one who hears

it. While it may be difficult Jesus wants the people to know the truth of who he is. The irony in this is that what most threatens, confuses and causes the most suspicion within them is the very thing they need in order to be free of those tumultuous feelings that rage within.

What the people experience here is analogous to what so many people experience when the truth of mental illness is revealed. Feelings of confusion, skepticism and denial abound. It is often the case that as human beings we reject that which we do not understand. The truth could be front and center, and all the signs could be present. You notice a dramatic shift in the mood and overall attitude of your partner. You recognize what seems to be uncontrollable anxiety in your child. You witness the social withdrawal and isolation of your student from themselves and others. You become aware of your friend's excessive use of drugs and alcohol. You can see the extreme difficulty your daughter has with concentrating and being still. You yourself experience feelings of sadness and a lack of motivation to engage in the world around you. These are examples of warning signs that can potentially point to the truth of a mental illness. The signs are there but they are sometimes, due to the narrative that has conditioned many of us to dismiss and reject mental illness, we don't quite see what is right in front of us. Embracing a new narrative will help us to recognize that there is a real mental health issue to address. This is the power of the truth that Jesus invites his audience of the day and each and every one of us to embrace. You will know the truth, Jesus says, and the truth will set you free.

But let's be honest: the truth about mental illness and what it represents can feel terrifying. The truth can be threatening to a person's identity and the way of life they have adopted as a "normal" and healthy human being. Knowing the truth can seem as though a person's sanity is at stake. People may use normalized yet hurtful words like "crazy" and insensitive phrases such as, "she has lost her mind" to refer to the affected. People may also blame the person with mental illness, asserting that somehow they themselves are responsible for the depression they feel or the voices they hear or the anxiety they live with. It can seem risky to accept the truth of mental illness and its presence in one's life and in the larger context of family and community. If connections have not been made regarding the presence of mental illness in the family through generations a new diagnosis can seem out of place. "No one else in the family suffers from this," we say. "There is nothing wrong with me," we say. "Those doctors don't know what they're talking about," we say. Mistrust of the medical profession and overall healthcare industry often deters people, particularly people of color, from seeking help and treatment. And the fear of being stigmatized, labeled and cast aside is all the more reason for many to stay as far away from acceptance of a mental health diagnosis as possible. It can seem easier to deny and fight the truth than to seek to understand and accept it.

Despite such factors the truth of the matter is that there is value in inquiring about that which we do not know. When we don't recognize what is right in front of us, as was the case with Jesus and the people who wondered about his identity, we can simply ask questions to gain clarity. "Who are you," the people asked Jesus. I wonder what it would be like for members of our community who live with mental illness, or those who love

someone who does, to be curious, rather than dismissive of the illness. Anxiety, who are you? Depression, who are you? Bipolar disorder, who are you? Schizophrenia, who are you? What does it mean for me that symptoms of PTSD are present? How can I live with attention deficit disorder? Why am I having suicidal ideations and what can be done about it?

Doing our homework in order to gain a better understanding of mental illness can be extremely helpful in creating a new narrative for how we understand the realities and complexities. Asking questions and being open to the answers we discover provides knowledge and insight that opens the door for freedom. Speaking with healthcare professionals about our mental health issues and concerns can be invaluable. Connecting with others who have personal experience with mental illness can shed light on the overall experience. Reaching out to mental health networks and organizations in the community for information and resources is key. Talking with trusted friends and family members about what we are going through can help tremendously and possibly provide insight about symptoms and behaviors. Gaining knowledge through measures such as these will be the first steps in walking toward freedom and liberty as we manage our mental health issues. Rather than taking on a passive “the less I know the better” stance, taking a more active approach in the acquisition of knowledge about the mental illnesses we live with, the contributing factors, symptom management, and available resources can lead to the freedom of experiencing an overall better quality of life.

Knowing the truth can also debunk the myths often associated with mental illness. Individuals and communities can move beyond believing that a person who presents with symptoms of mental illness, such as depression, is not in fact ill, but is just sad. People who know the truth can reject the notion that mental illnesses are not “real” illnesses, like heart disease or diabetes. People who know the truth can choose not to buy into the myth that mentally ill people are violent people. People who know the truth can choose not to believe that the symptoms can be willed or prayed away or that the presenting individual is attention seeking. People who know the truth can decide not to accept that there is no hope for getting better. Myths such as these, and a plethora of others, prevent the help, healing and wholeness that the mentally ill and their loved ones need. Stereotypes and stigmas are perpetuated in the most harmful of ways when such myths dominate the narratives of people’s lives. Knowing the truth can open pathways for seeking clinical treatment, getting therapeutic help, finding hope and ultimately walking in the new life and freedom that Jesus speaks of, which can ultimately change the course of a person’s life.

Knowing the truth about mental illness can also chip away at the fear that so often plagues us. It is often fear of the unknown that is most frightening to us. Fear of the implications of the diagnosis on relationships, careers, self-perception and the perception of others can keep those who need help from accessing it. Fear of not being accepted by others can have a significant impact on whether or not a person seeks treatment. Keeping it one hundred can enable those who are fearful about a mental health diagnosis

to face their fears in new and healthy ways that will propel them forward into new possibilities.

The good news of the gospel message is that knowing the truth and walking in the freedom that flows from it enables us to more fully speak our truth. With the acceptance of the truth we are emboldened to more fully own who we are. We are able, then, like Jesus, who knew who he was, despite how other people perceived him, to keep it one hundred. When we are no longer bound by the fear, stigma, shame, misinformation and lack of knowledge and skepticism about mental illness we can keep it one hundred. We can soar to higher heights when we are no longer weighed down by the bondage of what others will think of us or how they or society will define us. Another element of good news in all of this is that beyond our own individual freedom is the potential for others who live with mental illness to experience freedom as a result of what they learn from us. As stated in the book of Revelation, “We are overcome by the blood of the lamb and the word of our testimony.” Someone else’s freedom, then is inextricably bound to our own. In our newfound freedom we can share our stories with others. In our newfound freedom we can encourage others. In our newfound freedom we can educate others. When we dare to embrace the freedom that we have in truth and keep it one hundred we can pierce the dark shadows of hopelessness with the brilliant light of better and brighter days, even in the midst of living with mental illness.