



# United Church of Christ

## **MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK**

### MENTAL HEALTH SUNDAY

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019

*Acts 11:1-18 • Psalm 148 • Revelation 21:1-6 • John 13:31-35*

#### Call to Worship

Leader: May all people see the love, care, and compassion that is God.

**People:** **God is our counselor and therapist. They help us heal and walk life with our siblings or ourselves**

**living with mental health challenges.**

Leader: Hear, O God, our prayers of hope, reconciliation, and wellness that we may feel your presence

on our journey.

**People:** **God loves us through all our blemishes, and we respond by grabbing onto hope.**

**All:** ***God is a Holy Counselor and Journey Partner that holds us up with a beacon of Their immense***

***love today, tomorrow, and always.***

#### Prayer of Invocation

Dear God, we gather on this Mental Health Sunday, to lift mental illness out of the shadows and into the light, to talk openly about things that are often whispered, if they are talked about at all, and to confront the stigma that keeps people from dealing honestly with matters that are more common than we might care to acknowledge. Bless us with determination and persistence, as we strive to create safe space in our congregation for all people, including those dealing with mental health challenges, whether fleeting or lasting. Realizing that “they” are “us,” help us forge a path forward, together, toward a way of being that highlights empathy, universal compassion, and care for all your children. And give us courage and wisdom to keep the conversation alive, and to make it meaningful and helpful. We ask this in the name of the One who loves us all, no matter who we are or where we are on life’s journey. Amen.

#### Prayer of Confession (Follow with time for silent confession.)

**God our Eternal Counselor, your comfy sofa, devotion, care, and listening abilities are continuously available when life gets stormy. You are a paragon of compassion by holding a box of tissues up to us when we cry. At the same time, you know when to allow the tears to trail down our faces like that of a child that is full of anxiety, despair, and sorrow. We know you are there, yet, we have neglected to be a crying shoulder to our siblings living and walking with mental illness. We have ridiculed them. We have stigmatized them. We have made them feel less than their worth. Forgive us for our lack of compassion, love, and recognition that you affirm all of us regardless of physical, emotional, or mental health struggles and hurdles.**

## Words of Assurance

Leader: The Counselor has confirmed our session and has emphasized the love, care, and worth each one of us deserves and bring to the table. God forgives our lack of kindness, tenderness, thoughtfulness, understanding, and advocacy and grants us a box of tissue to share with our siblings.

**People: Thanks be to God!**

## Sermon Starters

### **Loving the Same “Other” by Dr. Vicki K. Harvey, Board Member, UCC Mental Health Network**

We talk a lot about crossing the line at UCC. Of welcoming the other. Often this is depicted as meaning people who don't look or sound like us, racially or nationally, or who express their being in the world in ways that appear intrinsically different via their sexuality or their cultural mores.

Making a commitment to find commonality and celebrate diversity in these various ways of being human is critical to expanding our own spirit, of living out God's mandate, and mostly, of connecting with our own life force in all its manifestations.

But, arguably, our most significant struggle to love “the other” comes when we are in relationship with one who may look just like us on the outside but inside goes to places we can't fathom or follow.

Individuals caught in the horrifying grip of mental illness are all around us. They are our friends, our co-workers, our family, our parishioners. They are beautiful in their gifts to us—their love, their talents, their wisdom, their play. And then they are not so lovely. They turn needy, or angry, or withdrawn, or unreliable, or demanding, or ungrateful, or unendingly sad.

They awaken our fears, for indeed, we are all only small degrees of separation from the same demons wreaking havoc with our psyches. They make mincemeat of our generous impulse to help because quickly we are aware of how huge the problem against our puny ability to act, to make it all better. And we really wish they wouldn't do that! We want to like ourselves again and regain our control and self-sufficiency.

Jesus talked to his disciples about his ascension in John 13:31-35. He, the Savior of the world was going. The only thing He was leaving, the only thing that was going to fill the void of His absence, the only thing capable of such a task—was one command. He told them to love one another as just as He had loved them. That was it. The baton was passed. You're it. Go.

Something tells me He wasn't referring to the easy to love. Denying oneself and taking up the cross daily as stated in Luke 9:23 is custom made for our journey in loving the mentally ill. Nothing about loving me is continuously easy. Nothing about loving the mentally ill will be continuously easy either.

I want to tell you a few of the tender ways I've watched churches live out this command towards those with mental health struggles.

A woman carrying in supplies for a potluck is approached by a young woman known to monopolize a lot of time with her needy rambles born of isolation and depression. She stops on the spot and sits and talks one on one with her, handing off her food to another. After a while, another woman joins and the first

woman takes her leave. Thus, the caring is spread and becomes less burdensome for one person, prompting the urge to avoid the struggling young woman. It ends with several practical suggestions, and promises to follow up later in the week.

Contrast this with the wide walk-around people take to avoid being 'trapped' with a person they didn't plan to talk to. The individual is left literally stranded in a sea of Christians, their own island in a place where they'd been promised community.

A group of marginalized people start attending church. They are noticeable for their adherence to a group that often dresses in odd clothing. They sometimes sit or lay outside as people are arriving for worship. For these behaviors they had been asked to leave their previous church. At the new church people show interest in them, invite them in, get to know them. They are given tasks in the various ministries. At times their struggles make it difficult. They can flash with anger, regress, or become non-communicative. Over the months however, as they find their place within the church family, they decide they don't want to wear their apparel identities. They enjoy bonding and identifying with others as they are, all because people looked past the outside and related to the living soul within.

An older man has been evicted from his home because of his mental illness and bad decisions. The church immediately jumps in with long and short-term solutions for him, everything from countless hours helping him move, to attending court with him to make sure he understands the proceedings, to offering shelter. His self-sabotage gets threaded through the expenditures of time, money, patience of the church community until a roommate is located that, as it turns out, also needs the gifts he has to offer, and together they form a stable unit that benefits both of them.

These are every day incarnations. These are the visibles of a God indwelling, God outreaching to those with mental illness. May we touch our own inner grace and open our soul's window to the one who awaits its healing balm.

### **A Litany of Life Experiences**

One: When we feel nervous, and the walls close in, and too many people are too close, and every day noises are too loud, and every light is too bright, and all we can do is plan our panicked escape from the situation we are in...

**All: God help us**

One: When sadness and depression pull us down like a lead weight, making it hard to move, hard to concentrate, hard to find motivation, hard to be alive, just hard...

**All: God help us**

One: When we can't help but burst into tears, and we learn the difference between crying and weeping, and the weeping won't stop, and we lose hope that we will ever feel hopeful again...

**All: God help us**

One: When information comes at us in blasts that we can't make sense of, and it seems like someone keeps randomly "changing the channel" when we try to focus, and it feels impossible to learn or keep up with what's going on around us...

**All: God help us**

One: When we get so revved that we want to take on the world, and leap tall buildings, and outrun freight trains and take on too many major projects at once, and stay up all night for days on end, and the only thing we know we can't do is slow ourselves down, until we crash out of control...

**All: God help us**

One: When voices inside our minds constantly intrude upon our lives, and when they won't stop and they confuse our thoughts and make it impossible to be with other people, let alone have any kind of real conversation...

**All: God help us**

One: When all we can see is a world that is out to get us, and we get stuck believing that some grand conspiracy is designed to hurt us, or ruin us, or kill us, and we believe that only our constant vigilance can save us, if anything can...

**All: God help us**

One: When we simply don't know how out of touch other people think our thoughts are...

**All: God help us**

One: When we feel completely isolated and alone, longing for social connections we cannot make...

**All: God help us**

One: When we feel utter despair, and we see more reasons to end our lives than to keep living...

**All: God help us**

One: When we strive with best intentions to stop addictions that are ruining our lives, and we try our best again and again, but we can't resist, and we end up over and over again at the same helpless place that we would give

anything to avoid...

**All: God help us**

One: When our thoughts jumble and things we thought we knew slip away, and we feel helpless, powerless, and scared, for the moment and for the future...

**All: God help us. Amen**

### **A Mental Health Sunday Litany**

One: To the God of many names and no name, we are your people touched and drawn to your presence among us.

**All: We search our hearts and lives as we look for your creative love and justice making presence in our days.**

One: Especially in this day we gather to affirm that among us we need the healing balm of Jesus' compassionate care for our bodies and our minds.

**All: Among us there are those like us who know about or have experienced directly mental health challenges which impact our living. We have sought purpose and meaning when darkness and bleakness have come upon some of us; we have sought treatments through therapists and medications to stabilize our moods; and we have come to be joined together in a faith and spiritual practices to sustain us and lead us to live with gratitude.**

One: Our intention, O God, is to break the silence on mental illness so those who live in the isolation of being stigmatized can find a safe space and a welcoming people so the fullness of life can be enjoyed.

**All: As we embrace those who live with serious depression, bipolar, anxiety and panic attacks, eating disorders or other mental illnesses, we pray that our actions and our words can be a comfort and a source of hope for each of us. Guide us, open us, instill wisdom, and lead us on the path of wholeness for your name's sake. Amen**

## A W.I.S.E. Litany (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, Engaged)

One: On our own, we forget that we are a bundle of bones, animated by the breath of God.

**All: On our own, we forget that human ways lead to a dry and dusty valley.**

One: When we remember God's promise of life and Love, we can become more than we are.

**All: When we remember the igniting power of the Holy Spirit, we become alive again to follow God's Holy Ways.**

One: Seeking to live in God's ways, means leaving fear behind and living in welcome.

**All: Seeking to embody Love, means including all our neighbors, especially those who are made vulnerable by mental illness.**

One: As the Spirit sets us on fire once again, we yearn to strengthen the Body of Christ by reaching out to those who experience the world as a place where chaos and confusion often reign.

**All: As the Spirit opens our hearts, we strive to be a community of love and support for those who live with mental illness.** One: We hear the groan of Creation. We feel it in our own lives. We hide our fears of inadequacy and our sense of brokenness deep within, forgetting that God is present in the depths as well as the heights.

**All: As we groan with the whole of Creation, waiting for God's healing grace, we commit to sharing our whole selves with God and one another. We will engage each other, with friends, with family, and with our neighbors, leaving no one out, especially those who have been stigmatized because of mental illness.**

One: On this Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the amazing power of the Spirit to humble us, unite us, and make us new.

**All: Come, Holy Spirit, Come. Blow through our hearts and minds, through the fears and foolishness that separate us one from another, and reshape us into the Body needed here and now.**

One: Come, Holy Spirit, Come. Fill us with new life, free of fear, ignorance, and stigma that we may truly welcome, include, support, and engage all your children, particularly those who struggle with symptoms of mental illness.

**All: Come, Holy Spirit, Come. Make us W.I.S.E. Amen.**

## Call to Offering

On this Mental Health Sunday we celebrate the many gifts that people living with mental health challenges bring to the church and to the world. Sometimes we view mental illness as a burden that depletes us and sometimes it does. Yet we also recognize that there are hidden gifts that come as well. Different ways of experiencing and understanding the world, different ways of being. For all the ways our lives are blessed by people living with mental health challenges, we give thanks. We give thanks that our lives are more than our illnesses. We give thanks for the UCC Mental Health Network and for all ministries of the church that provide compassion and support to people in need of love. Today let us bring our whole selves as an offering to God: our talents, our time, our treasure, and even those parts of ourselves we hide. We bring everything we are and have to God.

## Prayer of Dedication

O God, we call out in prayer, beyond our understanding,  
especially in times of need.

Our worship sends us forth in service,  
and we offer ourselves – not as individuals alone –  
but as part of larger efforts, and supported by our faith.

We dedicate ourselves to the maintenance of healthy boundaries, and to our own self-care,  
but also as instruments of blessing for others in need,  
particularly those who are affected by the challenges with mental health.

Help us to remember our call and promise,  
and to learn from the moments we falter or mis-step,  
that love may increase,  
that wellness may flourish,

that healing may come.  
As we have always been, we are yours,  
poured out in love for the world.  
Amen.

### **Benediction**

May the grace that says “you are not alone” encourage you.  
May the mercy that says “you are enough” comfort you.  
May the love that says “you are loved” embrace you this day and every day. Amen.

*The United Church of Christ Mental Health Network invites you to highlight mental health on the third Sunday in May or any Sunday that suits your schedule. For more information and resources, please visit our website at [mhn-ucc.org](http://mhn-ucc.org)*