

Church of the Pilgrimage
Kim Engle, Seminarian
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John 13:31-35

When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

As I Have Loved You

Please pray with me.

May my words be pleasing and our hearts be open in your sight Holy God. Amen

Teachers have a saying...show what you know. Imagine yourself at a table surrounded by slaves and other disciples. You are guided to sit down and someone comes, removes your sandals, and begins to wash your feet. The water feels warm and as you look down you are surprised to find that it is Jesus kneeling in front of you. Jesus says "Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet." He puts Himself in the role of a servant, and asks that we act as servants to express the great love that we have for one another. This is only one instance of His command, that we become servants to each other. In Mark he says "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."; in Luke, he says that those who serve are greater than those who sit at the table. We return to our teacher phrase, "show what you know." How can *we* go beyond simply **knowing** that we're to love? How can we **show** that we are humble and really serve?

Today is Mental Health Sunday. I remind you of this because the mentally ill are people that we commonly pray for and statistically, there are a great many of us here today that either have mental illness or have been affected by someone who does. According to the National Institute on Mental Health, mental illnesses are quite common in the United States. In some recent statistics, "Nearly one in four U.S. adults lives with mental illness." Let's look at a typical church service. Let's say there are one hundred people. Out of that 100, twenty five of them probably have some sort of mental illness. You can probably see them from your pew. In 2016 there were an estimated 44.7 million adults aged 18 and older in the US with mental illness. That is about 18.9% of adults, but out of that 44.7 million only "43.1% received treatment in the past year." Less than half of the people with mental illness got treatment. But that is another sermon. The takeaway here is that the person sitting next to you could be suffering from untreated mental illness. Now let's look at families. Consider that there are 44.7 million people with mental illness, and let's say there are 3 people per family (which is the national average). Multiply the 44.7 million people living with mental illness by the 3 members of each family and you get 134 million people, that is 41% of the US population, that either has mental illness or have an immediate family member who does. 41%! But wait! mental illness doesn't just affect families, it affects teachers, caregivers, friends, colleagues; so many that the final figure of people affected cannot really be counted. In short, there are so many people affected somehow by mental illness--it is very possible that it's you. And the statistics keep rising.

Let's come back from the land of statistics. Let me tell you a story. I have mental illness. As a matter of fact I am considered someone with a serious mental illness--the type that can land you in the psych ward. Now, I don't share this a lot because of the stigma. Most people still think that those with mental illness are always crazy, there's that image of the straightjacket and Jack from

one flew over the cuckoo's nest. Then there are the people that say "I'm soo OCD when their desk is messy or she's "so bipolar" when someone is moody. Sometimes, if I mention that I have a mental illness people think "it must make you so creative." That's nice, but that is a stigma too.

Most of us who have a mental illness, on most days, do everyday things just like you. I'm here to give you a little clue, a tiny clue into mental illness, because mental illness looks different in everybody so I can only tell you my own experience.

What I have is Bipolar disorder which the National Association for Mental Illness defines as manic episodes which are *extremely* up moods or by manic symptoms that are so severe that the person needs immediate hospital care. I've been there. There are, depressive episodes which are very down moods that occur as well, typically lasting at least 2 weeks and can be incapacitating. Been there. Lastly, there are episodes of depression with mixed features which is what you think it is, having depression and manic symptoms at the same time, these are the scariest of all. Unfortunately, been there too.

These things can be really serious and frequently scary, ask my family. They love me. They are with me through the whole thing, and have been for many years, and they have seen a lot, I mean a lot, including my kids.

This is what bipolar disorder looks like in me.

Let's look at mania. I start off as creative, full of energy, kind of fun to be around. The problem is, that this can quickly turn into full blown mania which can be really scary. What happens in mania is that my brain starts sending wiry conflicting messages. When I try to read, words get shiny then escape from the page. I get frustrated because you aren't keeping up. It's like my senses get mixed up and I interpret a taste sensation in my ears. Sleep is nowhere to be seen and I start hearing people who are not there. I can barely hold a conversation. If I were talking to you, you may think I was on drugs. I hear everything at the same decibel, cars driving by, the grass growing, the caterpillars chewing, the television, the person talking to me, All. The. Same. I can't figure out which is which.

After a manic episode I will probably fall into a depression. In the business, they say the higher the high, the lower the low. In a depressive episode, my thought processes get fuzzier and slow, I am robbed of words. I forget who I'm talking to as I'm talking to them, I have trouble putting whole sentences together. You would probably think I was drunk. It is now a fight everyday to get out of bed, and sometimes I just can't. The anxiety of living is so overwhelming I get panic attacks, noise in my head tumbles about. I can't read, words melt off the page. I am unable to do even the simplest of tasks.

I've had episodes like these but because I have the love of an entire team of people that help to keep me well and I work really hard, my disease can stay in remission.

"Better living through pharmaceuticals" I always say but that is really true, I come to you today thanks to the good people that make lithium and safris. The side effects are intense and it has taken many years to find a medication cocktail that manages my symptoms and keeps me upright. The down side about meds is the side effects which cognitively dull me, make it hard to concentrate, I do lose some of that playful side of myself, and they make me, well, a little less like me. I still have mood swings, to the point that you may notice, but they are manageable. To stay well I go to therapy and med checks regularly; I pray and am prayed for. I have to watch what I eat; my caffeine intake, my sleep and be mindful. For the most part all these things are doable, but wouldn't be without the love and support of those who love me.

Jesus said "no servant is greater than his master" but what if the disease seems like the master? Someone with mental illness can be very hard to love, because you can see the suffering, you see someone that barely looks human and there is nothing you can do about it but watch. You try to

serve them, but they fight back. You try to love them unconditionally but you need to step back for your own mental health. It is ok to do that. It doesn't mean you love them any less, it means you know your limits. Loving someone with mental illness can be exhausting and terrifying.

knowing that my family is taking care of themselves makes me feel a little less burdensome, which helps me more in the long run.

"Love one another, as I have loved you." How are you supposed to love a person like me? Especially when it feels like you have given everything you got to help them. How can they not feel your love? One of the most insidious things about mental illness is that when you have it, you can't always feel love like a well person, you are static and numb. Perhaps this is you. You know that people love you. You know that Jesus washes your feet, you see people trying to help you but you just can't feel it. The depression is just too much, the anxiety is just too strong, you might even feel abandoned by God. Jesus says "I am' Teacher and Lord", so *I* try to focus on Jesus. I just do it until I feel again. Fake it till you make it so to speak. It's not always that easy but it does get better. It might get worse then better but it always gets better.

Like I said, I have the love of an entire team of people to keep me well. Is it easy? I'm not them but I see some of what they go through, even if they don't think I do. I know they cry when I'm not around, and get angry. I know they sometimes have wondered why God has put me and my disease in their life. I know they get confused. I've watched my kids come and visit me in the psych ward and force feed me when I spent a month in bed. No child should have to do that. How can you love a person like me?

Chaplain Ernest Bruder, founder of the chaplain training program at Washington, DC's St. Elizabeth's Hospital, put it this way: "Those with mental illness are just like us, *only more so.*" I get this. This describes me perfectly. Yes, I get more manic and more depressed, but I also get more joyful and more loving. I am broken so I see amazing things in others who may also be "broken". When the balance is just right, I feel so deeply about just about everything it gives me pause when occasionally I can know that we are all connected. I weep for joy when I hear you sing, especially if you don't think you are good at it. I can laugh for you when you are not allowed to. I can dance for you when you are too scared to. I'm the one who hugs you in the parking lot, because my brain doesn't realize that it might be inappropriate.

Love one another as I have loved you. It was Jesus that put himself as the servant and washed the feet of the disciples. He talks of his being an example for you. "That you should also ought to wash another's feet" This is all well and good, but if you have someone with mental illness in your life that doesn't take their meds, tells you they are not sick, tells you that every doctor they see is a hack, self medicates with drugs and alcohol, won't get out of bed, constantly self harms, argues with you about just about everything, how are you supposed to love that?

As I have loved you.

As I have loved you.

None of this love you need to do by yourself. Jesus will love with you and always be by your side, humbling himself, washing your feet. Just as that son or daughter, or friend or parent, sister or brother needs you to be by their side, you need to let Jesus love you and stay by your side, because you can't do it alone, you don't have to do it alone. Jesus will wash your feet. "Love one another...as I have loved you."

Amen