

Other Options for the Message

I. The first reading considers the general theme of mental health, identifying how the stresses of everyday life can be alleviated by effective coping mechanisms.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16: 14-23

Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, 'See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.' So Saul said to his servants, 'Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me.' One of the young men answered, 'I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him.' So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, 'Send me your son David who is with the sheep.' Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul. And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. Saul sent to Jesse, saying, 'Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.' And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

Response

It's always dangerous to try and interpret, through modern eyes, descriptions that originate in a pre- scientific era. But we can conclude that Saul was a much-troubled man, beset by suspicion, sometimes bordering on the paranoid. For instance, he reacts violently to his feelings of jealousy when his young harpist, David, seems to be gaining in public affection at his expense. He certainly has a depressive aspect to his character that comes to the fore on a number of recorded occasions.

Although few of us resort to Saul's violence, many of the emotions that he experiences are ones with which we can identify. They are the stuff of the human condition. Most of us can manage them in such a way that our ability to function remains relatively unaffected. But when they become so intense or prolonged that we become emotionally paralyzed, even the simplest of tasks is too much to contemplate and we experience mental distress.

Saul's response to these symptoms lies in the soothing effect of music, something that can often lift a bleak mood or quieten an agitated one. It is not an answer per se to his problems, but it is an effective coping strategy; and strategies for dealing with the vicissitudes of life are something that we all need.

II. This passage paints an all too human picture of human exhaustion in the aftermath of enormous physical and emotional effort, the effect it can have on our mental health, and how we might effectively deal restoratively with it.

Scripture: 1 Kings 19: 4-13

But Elijah himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

Response

It is worth noting the context of this reading. Elijah has just taken on the prophets of Baal and in a show of strength demonstrated the power of the God of Israel. However this has left him feeling exhausted and he escapes into the wilderness. At the beginning of this passage 'he asked that he might die'. In our language we might observe that he feels suicidal.

We are all used to feelings of anti-climax after a big occasion and perhaps we can empathize with Elijah here. However, maybe this reaction is a little more extreme. It is certainly familiar to people who have bi-polar disorders also known as manic depression. In human terms, Elijah isolates himself, and his self-care suffers. This is also what people in an acute phase of mental illness do. This is not to suggest that Elijah is mentally ill, but to explain that mental illness is only an exaggeration of what we all think and feel at times.

God comes and ministers to Elijah. Notice that he eats properly and takes some exercise; he also rests. These are all very necessary when the stresses and strains of life get us down. It also means that we are able to give ourselves the time and space in which to hear the voice of God which comes in the stillness and not in the whirlwind.

III. Understood in the context of wellbeing, Paul's reflection on the place and significance of all people in the body of Christ is radically challenging of our sometimes complacent, even hostile, attitudes towards those whose ill-health unsettles and disturbs us.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12: 14-26

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Response

This is such a well-known passage that it's easy to miss its radical challenge, not only to the Corinthian community but also to Christian congregations today. At one level, it's clear that Paul is challenging his readers (and us) to recognize that we all have some part to play in the body of Christ, for no other reason than we are made by God and beloved of God. But the really crucial words lie in the phrases 'the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable' (v 22) and 'God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member' (v 24).

If we take these words at face value, those who suffer with physical, mental, emotional or spiritual distress (which at some time or other will be all of us) are to be the most highly valued members of the community. Being 'mentally ill' is a stigma-laden label. It is frequently attached to people whom secular society sees as threatening in some way. It almost always leads to the isolation of the person to whom it is attached.

Yet here is Paul telling us that this is not God's way of looking at things. He challenges us to be counter-cultural in our attitudes and behavior, radical in our thinking and prophetic in our actions.

IV. The following two passages are a challenge to us to look within ourselves, acknowledge those things that we do not find easy to accept and thus begin to locate a sense of wholeness. They are a reminder that we all possess the seeds of our own mental ill-health, as well as the green shoots of our spiritual wellbeing.

Scripture: Philippians 4: 4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Scripture: Romans 7: 14-25

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Response

We all seek peace, but to have it means we need to be reconciled - to ourselves, each other and to God. To achieve this we need to learn to accept our weaknesses and recognize our strengths. If we can do this for ourselves, then we will be able to accept others and see in them the image of Christ, enabling us to be reconciled to God and feel at peace. It sounds easy, yet we know it's difficult. Low self- esteem is a common problem leading to worry, anxiety and a search for approval. Thinking about things that are true, pure etc. is good for both our mental and spiritual health. When feeling low, we need help to achieve a better sense of proportion. One of the talking therapies, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), does this through helping us to re- frame our thoughts.

Response

This passage describes very well the inner conflict we all recognize when we try to struggle with ourselves. We may have fallen into bad habits such as watching too much television, eating too many chips, drinking too much coffee. As soon as we try to break these habits we discover just how hard it is. We may want to be healthier and take more exercise, but just wanting it does not make it happen. It's comforting to eat chips, and challenging ourselves provokes anxiety.

Any diet regime needs to consider issues of self-esteem. Are we good enough to be slimmer? Trying to change our habits exposes the thinking that lies behind them. The habits and behaviors have been used to mask feelings that are difficult to know about. It can be helpful to think about this as a spiritual struggle because we may be able to recognize our powerlessness and seek help. It may also help us to see that we are human beings, but we also have a potential for divinity.

V. As well as pointing to the values of the Kingdom of God, the Gospels are repositories of reflective wisdom about life in general, not least because they are built around the narrative of the lives of Jesus and his disciples. At a human level, it's possible to see in their lives, many similar pressures that can affect our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

Scripture: Mark 6: 30-32

The apostles returned from their mission. They gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Response

Scripture: Luke 12: 22-28

He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith!

In Mark's gospel, the miraculous feeding which immediately succeeds this passage follows a period of intense activity involving much teaching and healing. Like many of our lives, the human Jesus and his disciples must have been exhausted, both physically and spiritually. The retreat to 'a deserted place' might be a metaphor for the way in which we could deal with stress.

Response

How much time and energy – emotional and physical – do we spend trying to manage our lives? Of course, it's far easier to preach a gospel of self-restraint than it is to practice it oneself. But the pressures of modern life, almost irrespective of our circumstances, are such that we invariably find ourselves working harder and harder just to maintain our social position. And ultimately for what purpose, asks Jesus.

The gospel challenge, to allow ourselves to be like ordinary field flowers, two a penny, yet still more beautiful in God's eyes than all the finery that Solomon wore, is immense. But it holds within it, a powerful antidote to the stress and anxiety that are almost the inevitable consequences of the rapidly spinning merry-go-round that is modern life.

VI. One very human interpretation of this short passage from Matthew bears on the anxieties so prevalent in modern life, and our reluctance to confront our own feelings by indulging in avoidance behavior.

Scripture: Matthew 23: 23-25

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!"

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."

Response

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is understood as a behavioral addiction. People need to adjust pictures so that they hang straight or check that the front door is locked before they leave. Everyone may worry a bit about these things but it can become an obsession that is very disabling. If it takes several hours to leave the house because every door and window has to be checked many times, the person finds it difficult to go anywhere and may become socially isolated. However, focusing on this means people are able to evade recognizing that they are anxious or avoid facing difficulties such as work and money problems. These can then spiral out of control.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus is quite scathing of the Pharisees for their reliance on the law. In this passage he is critical that they are concerned with trivialities. Deuteronomy prescribes tithing of wine, corn and oil. It is the scribal tradition that extends this to herbs. There is also a priority given to external cleanliness. This takes attention away from what is going on inside someone. Ritual behavior can be very attractive to people who do not want to think about their feelings. In this case, it was their zeal for the details of the law that blinded the Pharisees to the prophetic and creative character of Jesus' minor infringements. For them, there was the fear that the Kingdom of God might feel overwhelming and such anxieties might be kept at bay through an emphasis on ritual behavior.

VII. This exquisite account of the anointing at Bethany in Luke's Gospel is a powerful reminder that our reliance on words, as our primary form of communication, can blind us to the power and depth of non-verbal communication.

Scripture: Luke 7: 36-39

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him - that she is a sinner.'

Response

This story of the anointing of Jesus' feet by this unnamed woman is one of the most poignant of the gospel stories. Primarily, this is because it communicates so much but without the need for any words. It serves as a reminder, if we needed one, that non-verbal communication can be infinitely more powerful, if we have the 'ears' with which to listen.

The woman is described as a 'sinner'. This, and the Pharisee's aside at the end of the passage, suggests that she was considered an outcast, someone whose only place was on the edge of polite society. As such, she holds a not dissimilar stigmatized position to those who live with mental ill-health.

Her sense of her own lack of self-worth may also account for the tears with which she bathes Jesus' feet. Instead of recoiling, Jesus not only allows his feet to be washed by her, but dried with her hair, then kissed and anointed. It is an encounter of the most intimate nature.

As observers through the text, we can use our emotional response to it, as well as our 'virtual' eyes and ears, to appreciate this woman's communication of gentle love, devotion and gratitude. No words are necessary.

