

I

As we mentioned at the start of the service today, for the next three Sundays, my colleagues and I are preaching a series of sermons called Everybody Hurts Sometimes. The inspiration for this series and format comes not in response to any particular event in the life of our community, but rather from general observations made by those who serve in our congregation's ministries of pastoral care, who have noted that suicide prevention, care giving, and aging are issues that have or will affect nearly every person in our community in some way.

Of course, there is nothing exclusively Christian about these topics. And to be clear, neither Whitney nor Margaret nor I are experts on any of these subjects. Our role as preachers is to put these topics into conversation with the biblical story and our Reformed theological tradition.

And so to lay some cards on the table, as we go about our work as preachers, in these weeks, we are beginning with a particular topic in mind and then seeking out biblical texts that support and speak to that topic.

There is nothing inherently wrong in such an approach, but there's an obvious danger. Starting with a topic and then seeking biblical texts to support it can sometimes allow the particular preacher's personal opinions to crowd their way into the task of the proclamation of the Word, which, of course, may or may not always be in line

with the personal opinions of the Holy Spirit.

So as always, my prayer is that where our words are the words of the Spirit, they might take root and be watered and bear good fruit that will last, and where our words are not the words of the Spirit, that they may be scattered and quickly forgotten.

II

Suicide, the act of intentionally harming oneself with the intent to kill oneself, has of course been part of human life for as long as there have been humans. Within the biblical story itself, there are seven people who are reported to have died by suicide, including Saul, the first of ancient Israel's kings, and Judas, one of Jesus' original twelve apostles.

Throughout history, the church has struggled theologically and pastorally with the issue of suicide. For many years, the official position of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters was that suicide was so great a sin that it would delay or even preclude one's entry into heaven, although they have backed away from that position in recent years.

But even among our Protestant siblings not so very long ago, those who died by suicide were sometimes not allowed to have their bodies laid to rest in church cemeteries. Those who survived suicide attempts sometimes faced criminal charges, and they and their families were ostracized in their communities.

We modern Christians by no means have solved the problem, but I am so very grateful for the courageous women and men in this congregation who are unafraid to address these conversations with loving hearts and open minds, who are committed to loving their neighbors and to making the church into the body of Christ.

III

So if suicide has been around as long as humans have been around, what, if anything, can we say about it as modern people of faith?

I think it's vitally important that we confess that for at least some of us, if perhaps not all of us, there has or will come a day in our lives where we speak words like these. "It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life."

These words were spoken by none other than the prophet Elijah. Remember, Elijah is one of the great heroes of the Old Testament. He battled mightily in word and in deed for the Lord in a time when both the king and the people had turned away to false gods. But even Elijah the mighty prophet reached a point in his life where he prayed, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life."

Most of us have or will come to a point in our lives where we are exhausted, afraid, full of pain, and we feel utterly alone, and the thought of ending our life, or praying earnestly to God to end it, crosses our minds.

And I want to be crystal clear. Such a thought, such a prayer, is not a sin. It is not an act of cowardice. In fact, I would argue that such a deep, honest prayer before God is eminently human act and one of deep, biblical faith.

IV

Earlier this month, a man by the name of Walter Brueggemann died at the age of 92. Dr. Brueggemann was a brilliant biblical scholar, and during my first semester of seminary, I was privileged to hear Dr. Brueggemann give a lecture on the psalms of lament.

The Psalms are unique in biblical literature, because not only are they God's Word to us, but they're also our words to God. The Psalms are the prayer journal of ancient Israel. Jesus, as a faithful first-century Jew, grew up praying the psalms, as did all of the first disciples.

Of the 150 psalms in our bibles, that have been passed down to us, two-thirds of them can be classified as psalms of lament, also known as the blues. And typically, in a psalm of lament, the psalmist brings a prayer before God. The psalmist lays out the situation and explains to God why God should act to bring some sort of relief or resolution. Oftentimes the petition of a lament psalm is stated in very strident terms, like in Psalm 22, the psalm that Jesus prayed from the cross, that begins "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

In most lament psalms, by the end, there's a turn, there's a resolution. There's a key change, so to speak. Psalm 22 begins "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," but by verse 21, something has changed, because the psalmist prays, "in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

In most psalms of lament, there's a turn. The lament has turned to praise.

But not Psalm 88.

Listen now for a Word from God from Psalm 88.

O Lord, God of my salvation,

when, at night, I cry out in your presence,

let my prayer come before you;

incline your ear to my cry.

For my soul is full of troubles,

and my life draws near to Sheol.

I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;

*I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,*

*for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.*

Your wrath lies heavy upon me,

and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah

You have caused my companions to shun me;

you have made me a thing of horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

my eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call on you, O Lord;

I spread out my hands to you.

Do you work wonders for the dead?

*Do the shades rise up to praise you?
Selah*

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,

or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

Are your wonders known in the darkness,

or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

But I, O Lord, cry out to you;

in the morning my prayer comes before you.

O Lord, why do you cast me off?

Why do you hide your face from me?

Wretched and close to death from my youth up,

*I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.
Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.
They surround me like a flood all day
long;
from all sides they close in on me.
You have caused friend and neighbor to
shun me;
my companions are in darkness.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

You won't ever see Psalm 88 cross-stitched, framed, and hung in the church parlor, but I for one am so thankful that it's right there in our bibles. When the psalter was being compiled ages ago, I bet there was an argument about whether or not to include it at all. Walter Brueggemann calls Psalm 88 an embarrassment to "conventional faith." What he means by that is that the conventional faith story says that if you do right, everything will go well and you'll live happily ever after. And if you get in trouble, just pray and God will fix it.

But Psalm 88 doesn't fit that mold.

To me, the very fact that Psalm 88 is in our bibles is further proof that the biblical story is true, because sometimes, Psalm 88 is all we can honestly pray. God, this hurts. God, this is your fault. God, my friends and companions have shunned me, and I am all alone here in the dark. The end.

Sometimes it feels like no one can possibly relate to or understand what we're going through. And we look around at our peers and our neighbors and our classmates, and we scroll through our social media feeds, and we come to church, and everyone looks so nice in, and everyone seems to have it all together, and we think, boy, I must really be a mess. Everyone else is up there on the mountaintop, and I'm way down here in the valley, and nobody knows me and nobody sees me. Maybe the world would be better off without me in it. It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.

That's real. That's honest. That's human.

My sibling in Christ, Psalm 88 says that you don't have to pull any punches in your prayers. You don't have to use a bunch of flowery language or hem and haw or beat around the bush when you talk to God.

Praying like Psalm 88 is not an act of disrespect, or apostasy, or heresy. It's an act of deep biblical faith.

Because if the psalms are indeed the prayer book and hymnal of ancient Israel, then our great-great-great-grandmothers and great-great-great-grandfathers in faith have prayed Psalm 88.

So, if and when you find yourself in that place of darkness and silence and a foreboding sense of isolation and abandonment, I hope you'll remember that you are not the first child of God

who has ever passed this way, nor will you be the last.

If Jesus can cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” you can, too. If Elijah can pray, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life,” you can voice that to God, too.

The gospels tell us that one day, Jesus went up a mountain to pray, and while he was praying, Jesus was transfigured, and his clothes and face became as bright as the sun, and suddenly there were two more men there on the mountain speaking with Jesus. One was Moses, and the other was Elijah, this very same man who once prayed, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.” Elijah was not a coward. He was a human being who was hurting.

V

In our Presbyterian way of being the church, we are confessional – that is, there are some documents we call confessions of faith that are the lenses through which we read Scripture. One of those documents is called the Apostles’ Creed, which Christians have been using to shape and guide our faith for at least 1,600 years. Here at First Presbyterian Church, it’s the confession that we recite in worship most often, and it’s the one with which we are most familiar.

There’s a line in the creed about Jesus’ death and resurrection that sometimes catches people’s attention. It says, *I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived*

by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell...

Those four words, “He descended into hell,” have been the subject of no small amount of debate over the centuries. In fact, some of our siblings in other branches of the church family tree have chosen to omit those four words when they recite the Apostles’ Creed.

But I for one am glad that they are there and that we Presbyterians continue to recite and affirm them. Because in my own practice of ministry, I have been with people who have been living in a kind of hell right here on earth. I have been with people who are suicidal, and I have witnessed the hell on earth of grief and anger and fear and shame that suicide creates for the friends and family who survive them.

Thank God that the creed reminds us all that he descended into hell, reminding us that there is no place, either above the earth or on the earth or even under the earth, that is unreachable by the love and mercy of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Heaven forbid it, but should we, as people of faith, be affected by the death by suicide of someone we know and love, we can and should grieve their death as if it came by any other means. We should mourn them and grieve them, and we should gather to worship God in a service of Witness to the Resurrection as we do for all of our

siblings who have died and rest from their labors.

As people of resurrection faith, we proclaim that the founder of our faith went through hell for us. The founder of our faith died for us. The founder of our faith was raised again for us. And even when we find ourselves utterly alone, exhausted, afraid, when the final word in our prayer is darkness, even then, the founder of our faith prays for us.

We worship and serve a God who is with us and for us. Over and over again in Scripture, that truth is affirmed. When Elijah came to a point in his life and asked that he might die, when Elijah prayed, "It is enough," God did not smite him or chastise him or reject him. In his grief and weariness, Elijah lay down to sleep, and when he woke up, there on a stone nearby were cakes and a jar of water.

Bread. Water. Elemental things. Sacramental things. Sustenance for the weary. Signs and symbols of God's presence with us, even when, in the darkness, we pray, "It is enough, O Lord."

VI

A thousand years after Elijah's time, a man named Paul wrote a letter to some friends of his who were struggling to be faithful in the midst of a world gone mad. Paul himself had more than once come to a place of exhaustion, pain, and darkness.

As he wrote to his friends, he wasn't writing specifically about suicide

or its aftermath, but as we have more conversations today about suicide prevention and our lives together as people of faith, they speak to us.

So listen now for a Word from God from Romans 8:31-39.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

'For your sake we are being killed all day long;

we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This, too is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.