

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B | Mark 3:20-35; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA

June 10th 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Monday I was updating our website to upload last week's sermon text and audio and to put links to this week's hymns and readings -- did you know we do that? Not the most subtle plug ever, but yes, we do that every week -- go check it out, if you'd like!

Anyway, I'm looking at the readings for today and I was thrilled to read the Gospel reading from Mark. Jesus' family is waiting for him, and someone in the crowd tells him so, and Jesus gives one of those classic responses that must have been both unpredictable and somewhat confusing: "*who are my mother and my brothers?*" Can you imagine the poor guy who was actually asked this question? He was just trying to be nice to this Rabbi who, by now, has quite the reputation for new teachings and causing a bit of an uproar in the Jewish communities, and so he, perhaps nervously, approaches Jesus to relay the message: "oh by the way, your family is over there and asking for you." No harm done, no problem here, sir. An innocent comment for sure. One with little other meaning than what was implied. But oh no. Jesus had to make some big theological point about it, moving effortlessly into a great teaching point after what was meant to be an innocuous comment, and in doing so, you know, only completely redefined "family" as we know it: "*who are my mother and my brother? Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*"

I was all ready to jump into this marvelous redefinition of family, that for the people of God, our family is ever growing, and those people you see to your left and right, in front of and behind you, are all your family. And even more than that, whoever does the will of God? I bet people do that all the time without ever realizing they've done it! Imagine all of the things that would qualify:

Micah 6:8 What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

1 Peter 2:15 For it is God's will that, by doing good, you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people

Or perhaps more memorable: love God and love your neighbor, on these two hang all the law and the prophets.

Simpler still: thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

I was all ready to give that sermon, especially as we gather for the first of our summer services as one church family together! But then the week continued to evolve and, as so often can happen, best laid plans fall by the wayside.

I was surprised at how saddened I was upon hearing the news of the deaths of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain by suicide. I'd never met either of them, I wasn't particularly adamant one way or the other about Kate's handbags or Anthony's books and shows, but still, when death occurs in the public sphere, especially by suicide, we tend to pay attention. Undoubtedly, there have been questions of motive. Probably accusations of cowardice. Probably vile things said by people with nothing better to do while staying anonymous on the internet. I was expecting all of these things, but honestly, I didn't find much of it. Instead, in almost every reaction I saw online or in person, I saw or heard sorrow, sadness, compassion, heartache, and perhaps more than anything, an almost-ever present sympathy for mental illness and a desire to help those who are suffering still. My how far we've come.

And yet, for so many, suicide is a taboo topic. One better avoided. One that's uncomfortable to talk about. One on which we might have very formed opinions. One where we might think we have a good idea as to what the Church has believed about it. We are part of a faith tradition that values life, without a doubt. We believe that we have been created in the image of the God of life and have been promised life eternal because we share in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For a long time, given what we believe about the sanctity of life, and especially given that there is a commandment "you shall not murder," Christianity had a fairly one-sided stance against suicide, or more accurately, against those who died

by suicide, which often took the form of people assuring themselves of their own righteousness while judging those who died by suicide as surely going to hell. Unfortunately, this still happens today, and it is still a common conclusion. But looking back to our history and to our present time, it is more nuanced than that. Even back to St. Augustine, yes, the Church did not approve of suicide, but not for the reason that many might think, not because it was some guaranteed ticket to hell. Instead, Augustine was vehemently against suicide because so much of Roman culture encouraged it as the right thing to do if someone had suffered a dishonor or had failed in some way. Roman women who had been abused were encouraged to commit suicide for the same reasons. It was these kinds of societal pressures that led to suicide that Augustine was writing and speaking against.

But for the majority of cases today, those who die by suicide are not doing so for those kinds of motivations. For an overwhelming number of deaths, it is from the cause of mental illness, from depression, from crippling anxiety. Many suffer silently for years, decades even, with no one else being any the wiser. Even now, though our national dialogue about suicide has grown much more compassionate than it has ever been, the stigma of mental illness and depression is still a serious obstacle to folks who are suffering having the ability to get help or even talk about it. The Church today finds itself in a position that it should always be in -- that we point to Jesus who came to us that we might have life in him and live it abundantly -- and we point to the same Jesus who befriended and cared for the lowly, the sick, the outcast, and the suffering. Because of our belief in Christ, many in the Church, myself included, now see the need to speak about suicide with compassion, never with shame.

At this point you might be thinking "who were Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain that the whole second half of this sermon is about suicide?" Again, I don't know much about them or even if they were faithful people, but I do know that they have been remembered fondly this week as people who helped others fit in and who had a hope for bringing people together. I read numerous accounts of women and men who couldn't afford trendy handbags for their children until Kate Spade came around -- and given how much bullying occurs over the gap between the rich and the poor, or those who have and those who do not, I imagine those affordable handbags were lifelines for many a teenage girl. And as for Anthony Bourdain, there were countless stories told of how his love of food and feeding people turned into a great career of telling stories of other cultures so that we just might realize how much we have in common and that we don't have to fear one another. Giving hope and loving neighbor -- those sure sound like doing the will of God to me, which according to Jesus, makes Kate and Anthony his sister and his brother.

Finally, these readings today tell the story of God and God's eternal love again and again.

From the Psalm:

The Lord will make good his purpose for me;
O Lord, your love endures for ever;
do not abandon the works of your hands.

From St. Paul:

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.

This is a love that does not stop. A love that does not require prerequisites. A love that is unconditional. A love that is compassionate for those times when we come up short. A love that picks us up again when we fall. A love that reminds us that we are indeed beloved.

A love that, in Christ, specifically sought out those who were cast out and brought them back into the fold.

A love that, in Christ, specifically sought out those who were ravaged by illness and made them whole again.

A love that, in Christ, specifically sought out those who were loved by none and instead said "you're part of my family now."

A love that says again and again that nothing and no one is too far gone for any reason to be outside the eternal reach and grace of God.

Friends, if you are suffering with mental illness, depression, or have suicidal thoughts, I implore you to seek the help that so many can offer. And if that seems like too much, please, please, please just say a word to someone you can trust. My door will always be open to you. Maybe it's someone to your left or your right or in front of you or behind you right now. We're family, after all, and families take care of one another, especially the family of God.

Amen.