

## THE PRACTICE OF HEALING

(The fourth in a Lenten Series *Return to God with All Your Heart*)

Guest Preacher: Pam Brown

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Good morning. My name is Pam Brown. I want to thank you and Susan for inviting me here this morning. I'm not here before you as an expert but rather as a fellow struggler, seeking healing and finding it to be a long journey of ups and downs and forwards and backwards. I need healing in a lot of ways, but I'm here this morning to share a family story that I suspect will resonate with many of you.

I'm sharing my story because I know there are members of this congregation who have similar stories. I know this not because I know you personally but because I know the statistics. Assuming there are 100 people here today (although I can see there are more), 1 will suffer from schizophrenia, 1 from bipolar disorder, 13 from anxiety disorders, and 5 from major depression. That totals about 20% of us and about 25% of the families in this congregation who are also suffering. Few escape untouched when it comes to mental illness. Yet mental illness remains a hidden disease, largely cloaked in silence and isolation. I want to break that silence.

It was 4 and a half years ago that a friend and I admitted my son, then 18, to the psychiatric floor of Catholic Medical Center in Manchester, NH. I'll never forget what it was like to leave him there, the confusion, disbelief, pain and tears. He had been a good athlete and a college-bound student and looked forward to playing on the varsity lacrosse team. The downward spiral began in the spring of his junior year, as it often does with this illness, when he was cut from the lacrosse team and his girlfriend broke up with him in favor of his best friend. His behavior became uncharacteristic, his group of friends changed, he started skipping classes, eventually dropped out of school, and left home to drift between friends' houses. He was 17 and there was nothing we could do legally to intervene. Within 8 months, his friends sent him home, nearly catatonic. He refused to see a therapist or psychiatrist and refused to take the medicine prescribed by the physician for depression. Finally, he stopped eating, and we knew we had to get him in the hospital. It took a lot of phone calls to figure out how and where to do that. That doesn't happen with other illnesses.

That day, in the emergency room, we learned that his diagnosis was not depression but rather psychosis. Psychosis. What is that? I tried to think back to my Psych 101 course. How many of you here know? I see many shaking heads and some hands. It's an inability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. It manifests itself in a variety of ways: hallucinations, which can be visual or auditory, such as hearing voices, delusions or paranoia, believing something that is not real. I'd like to think that I'm a responsible parent and fairly well informed, but mental illness wasn't even on my radar screen. We had no mental illness in our family that we knew of – we later learned otherwise. It just wasn't anything we even considered as a possibility for our children. That's one of the consequences of silence.

We've learned a lot since then. Our son spent 3 weeks in the hospital. Once he finally agreed to take the medicine, he began to improve significantly. He was so grateful for the relief that he referred to the medicine as a "miracle drug." Our first sign of hope was when he earned his high school diploma within 8 months after getting out of the hospital.

However, there were many setbacks in his process of healing. There was another major crisis within 8 months after his high school graduation when we learned that he had a serious drug addiction and needed to go into a residential treatment program. There is a high co-occurrence between mental illness and addiction, affecting over 50% of people with serious mental illnesses. It's called dual diagnosis and is a double whammy that is very difficult to overcome.

Perhaps the hardest part of trying to support your loved one through the dual diagnosis of a mental illness and addiction is the incredible stress that it puts on the family. You try to maintain a perception of normalcy when others

have no idea what you're going through. For those looking on, it may appear that families are uncaring or unsupportive because their loved ones are living on the street or in shelters, when they are deeply caring and pained by the counterintuitive role that the illness forces on them.

I've learned a number of other things along the way:

- 1) That mental illness, whether it is depression, or anxiety, or bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia is a debilitating disease that is not easy to overcome. There are many ups and down and no clear path from diagnosis to recovery. However, it is treatable and the prognosis is good, compared to other illnesses. The problem is that too many people are not getting treatment.
- 2) That with proper treatment and support, people with mental illnesses can recover and lead productive, creative, and happy lives. Recovery is a relatively new expectation in the last 5 to 10 years. It is not cure but it is the ability to live a life of wellness in spite of the illness. Admittedly, I know this not so much from my own experience yet, but from knowing the stories of others who are farther down the path, both as family members and as those suffering from mental illness.
- 3) Mental illness and addiction are family diseases in that they affect everyone in the family and can, in themselves, create stress and trauma that challenge marriages and personal mental well being.
- 4) It is difficult at times to trust God, to keep your faith, and to stay hopeful, yet God is working in God's way and in God's time. I have had that demonstrated to me in so many ways.

What can the church do to promote healing? The church can be what it has been for me: an important source of hope and spiritual strength, a caring community, and advocacy for those in need.

Here's what you can do to practice healing and to be a healing power for others:

1. If you don't know much about mental illness, become educated. Mental illness doesn't discriminate. It can happen to anyone, regardless of economic level, race, gender, or parenting skills and love.
2. Help fight the stigma of mental illness. It is a medical illness of the brain, evidenced by biochemical imbalances and physical changes. It is not a defect of character, sign of weakness, or define who you are. At the same time, research is demonstrating that the longer it goes untreated, the more physiological damage that is done.
3. Offer hope, support and understanding to family and friends who may need it. Take care not to blame the victim or the family. Culturally, we've been doing that for decades, creating guilt and shame that are totally unmerited.
4. Advocate for the disabled and mentally ill. Call your state and federal representatives in support of human services and parity in insurance coverage, medical benefits, and disability coverage for the mentally ill – especially in this time of budget cuts. Given the chronic and disabling nature of some of these illnesses, the discrepancies are alarming.
5. Finally, and most importantly, pray for those who suffer from mental illnesses, for their family members, for advances in research and treatment, and for the community support they so desperately need.

After worship today, I will be part of a discussion for those who have questions, who may want to learn more, and

who may be dealing with issues in their families or among their friends. I hope you will consider joining us. We need to end this silence together.

Thank you and God bless.