

First Presbyterian Church in Marshfield, WI – June 11, 2023

Sermon:

Mind and Spirit

- Bringing mind and spirit together to handle the struggles of the human condition -
(Rosangela Berbert)

Readings: Psalm 23 and Ephesians 3:14-21

Message:

Greetings from the Staff and Board of Directors of Samaritan.

I am honored to worship with you today and bring greeting from my church – First Presbyterian in Oshkosh – and from the staff and board of directors of Samaritan.

Samaritan has a long-lasting relationship with your Presbytery and many Churches surrounding our main location in the Fox Valley, and it is wonderful to see the reach of this relationship reaching your congregation now.

At Samaritan, we believe in helping clients engage their spiritual beliefs and practices, however a person interprets them, as a resource for helping adults and children to find hope, healing, and be restored to wholeness of mind, body and spirit. Having faith communities like yours aligning with us in this mission makes a great difference!

We are living in unsettling times and more than ever Mental Health has been on the spotlight. Interestingly, but not exactly surprisingly for people of faith, there's evidence showing that in this same context there's an increased interest in spirituality, even as church attendance seems to be declining.

According to the [2022 American Psychological Association's Stress in America study](#), around a third of adults (34%) reported that stress is completely overwhelming most days. And this is much worse for some subgroups of adults, like younger adults, blacks and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

In the words of Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder, founder of Mental Health Ministries in St. Louis: *"Mental illness affects all aspects of our life including our spiritual wellbeing. It strikes at the very soul of our being (...). It is like a thief in the night."*

My hope is that today I can bring some new perspective on how we can connect our mind and spirit to deal with our own emotional and psychological distress so we can thrive and be better equipped to support others.

Emotional and psychological struggles are conditions that all humans experience to some degree throughout life.

It can go from natural feelings like sadness in face of separation from a loved one - to the extreme of a clinical depression, when a person experiences such depth of hopelessness and psychological pain that death seems to be the only way out of it.

It can go from the natural excitement of an anticipated happy event, like preparing for a party, to the extreme of anxiety that can render a person nonfunctional and suck all the hope out of their life.

These emotional and psychological struggles have been a part of the human condition since the start of times.

Whether we hold onto the origin narrative in Genesis or onto the scientific theories of evolution, we can't deny that humanity has always wrestled with the reality of our natural vulnerability to the adversities of this world, and the fact that Death is the culmination of this vulnerability.

According to the Genesis 3, when the first humans learned the difference between Good and Evil, the first emotions experienced seem to have been guilt and shame ("they saw they were nude", "they hid from the Lord"). As the serpent had told them, they did not die, at least not physically at that point, but they did become aware of their vulnerability and, along with guilt and shame, they begun to experience fear, worries, sadness, and all the other pains that came from becoming aware of their separation from God.

From then on, the core condition that afflicts us all is the broken relationship with God, or as we say in our practice at Samaritan, the loss of connection with the sacred within us.

Let's me focus on anxiety to try to help us understand it better and find a spiritually grounded way to deal with it.

Anxiety is defined as

A feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.

Anxiety is a natural feeling. As a person of faith, I see it as a reminder that I cannot rely on

myself alone, and it drives me to seek a connection with the Sacred, with God.

Anxiety can become extreme and turn into a mental health problem. When we get to that point, it can be very difficult to get out of it by ourselves because we can get stuck in some patterns of anxious thinking that keep us from seeing even God's hand stretched to rescue us. That is the point when we need help.

Allow me a moment of self-disclosure:

I come from a family of anxious people. Both my mom and her dad struggled with undiagnosed anxiety for many years. My brother, my sister, and my two daughters have been diagnosed with generalized anxiety for which they have received professional help, and, as you already guessed, I also have received the same diagnosis. This same family of anxious people is also a family of strong faith and long church tradition (the church I grew up in, back in Brazil, literally started in my maternal great-grandmother's living room...). With this long faith lineage, even as I have relied on medication prescribed by my doctor at times, I depend on my faith and prayer practices to help me cope with my condition. It also comforts me to go to the Bible and read about many faith heroes who also struggled with anxiety, depression, and other human conditions and how they found relief through their close relationship with God.

One of these heroes is David.

The same David that had the courage and spiritual strength to face and defeat Goliath and who was called 'a man according to God's heart', is the same man who seems to have struggled with anxiety and depression during his time as king.

As we read David's Psalms, we see a man who had much to be anxious about. The man who wrote about the Valley of Shadow of Death must have walked through it, and likely more than once.

This is the same man who felt God's rod and staff bringing him comfort. I can imagine here that David perceived God's rod and staff working to keep dangers away from his life, but perhaps also feeling like God figuratively "applied" the rod and staff on his back when he strayed away from God's path, and he acknowledges God's rod and staff as instruments that brought him comfort.

It is not easy to get at the point where we understand God's discipline as comforting. But it is possible, and it is healing.

In my work with clients at Samaritan, when they came with a Christian background, I often brought up David into our conversations. I think David's Psalms may be the first example of journaling as a therapeutic resource!

His Psalms are full of raw human emotions. They let us see how he used to pour out his heart to God, both during dark times and in times of joy.

His Psalms are exquisite examples of how we can journal our prayers and find healing in doing it.

Prayer is a powerful tool for healing. And throughout the Bible we can find many men and women of faith relying on prayer for relief from their emotional and spiritual distress.

There are many medical studies that explore prayer's healing powers and how they improve recovery from several medical and psychiatric conditions.

For us, within the faith community, this is not a surprise. We are used to the power of prayer. I suppose most of us are quite used to praying in church as a group, or at mealtime, or at bedtime. But what about praying by ourselves when things get tough?

When we experience anxiety, usually it is because, for some reason, we feel "out of control". It comes in face of uncertainties when we deal with unknowns and when we feel vulnerable. Has anyone felt this way over the past few years, by chance? Or when we turn on the news or open social media and learn of a new mass shooting, a new drop in the economy, a new act of social injustice?

It is during those times when faithful people can fall into what Parker Palmer called "Functional Atheism" in his book "Let Your Life Speak" (1999). He was referring to the belief that, the ultimate responsibility for everything, or at least the responsibility for 'keeping it together' for ourselves and our loved ones, rests with us even though we believe in God.

Often when we are anxious, we wear ourselves out trying to be in control.

In our work at Samaritan, we often hear anxious people talk about their "need to know", because knowing gives people the illusion of having control over situations.

But if we are spending so much time, energy and focus on trying to take or keep control, we usually leave little to no room for God to be in control in and of our lives. Then, at those times, even the most pious person, is acting as a functional atheist.

How then to revert this?

The magic bullet that secular professionals are using is “mindfulness”. Mindfulness has become quite popular as of late, but it is an ancient concept. It is a practice with roots in Buddhism that has been ‘rediscovered’ by western culture.

Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and physical sensations. It is used as a very helpful therapeutic technique.

Some Christians may have reservations about this practice because of its origins, but I believe Jesus gave instructions on how to practice mindfulness when he addressed an anxious crowd as we read in Luke 12:25-28,32:

Do Not Worry

²⁵Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life^[b]? ²⁶Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

²⁷“Consider how the wildflowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ²⁸If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!

³²“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

For Christians, the closest practice to mindfulness and living in the present is living a prayerful life, like we read in 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18 – “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

But it can be hard to pray when we are anxious, and that’s why developing a discipline of prayer can be helpful. When we learn to ‘pray continually’, prayer can become as natural as breathing. And practicing a breathing prayer, like the one included in today’s bulletin, can lead to a new spiritual balance that can help us manage our daily anxieties.

So, to bring a practical piece to my message today, I want to end with some directions that Samaritan’s counselors often give to our clients when they are open to spiritual a practice.

Following the example that Jesus gave us when he went to pray alone in the mountain:

- Set some alone time for quiet prayer.

- Recognize and accept that it may not be easy to pray alone at first or when you are in the thick of anxious times, because your brain will not quiet down easily and your thoughts will be running with many preoccupations. It is hard to pray when you feel like you are walking through the valley of shadow of death.
- In quiet prayerful contemplation, acknowledge these distracting and troubling thoughts and “Pray these thoughts”, like King David did and left several examples in the book of Psalms.
- Give your thoughts to God, put them in God’s hands, surrender them to God...
 letting God take them from you,
 letting God lead your thoughts,
 and letting God respond to the yearnings of your heart.

As we read earlier in the passage from Ephesians, when by faith we become more fully aware that Christ dwells in us, and when we are grounded by Christ’s Love that surpasses all knowledge, we are filled with all the fullness of God. And God can do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.

Practice this regularly and if you still do not feel relief to your emotional and spiritual struggles, maybe you want to give Samaritan a call...

Benediction

Eph. 3:17-21 –

“May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now, to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen.