

STAYIN' ALIVE
Randall Tremba
August 17, 2014
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

Matthew 15:22-28

A Canaanite woman started shouting at Jesus from a distance, *Have mercy on me, Lord; my daughter is tormented by a demon.* But Jesus did not answer her at all. His disciples urged him, saying, *Send her away.* (Jesus almost agreed and then had a change of heart.)

A prayer from the Iona Community

Lord of the excluded

*Open our eyes to those we would prefer not to see.
Open our lives to those we would prefer not to know.
Open our hearts to those we would prefer not to love.
And so open our eyes to see where we exclude you.*

* * *

The death of Robin Williams this past Monday has put suicide and mental illness on our minds and in our hearts perhaps like never before. In case you hadn't heard or noticed, there is much mental illness in our country—by some estimates as many as one in four people—much of it misunderstood and misperceived.

Some is brain related and can be managed with medication. But not all. Some is environmental and social, related to personal, family and community dynamics.

Not all mentally ill people take their own life or even contemplate it. And not every suicide is precipitated by mental illness. One explanation doesn't fit all.

In this world, many are tormented by thoughts and feelings that push them to despair. It's tempting to shut our eyes and wish troubled people would go away. They disturb our tranquility and sometimes our sleep.

Paula and I were married here in this sanctuary in October of 1976. We took up residence in the Presbyterian manse on the corner of German and Church Streets. It was my first year as SPC's minister. And, as fate would have it, in that very first year, I was called to prevent a suicide.

The phone rang in the middle of the night. *Please, come quick,* cried the voice. *My friend is going to kill himself.* It was a neighbor from across the street whom I barely knew and who barely knew me.

I went to the apartment. I saw the young man with a pistol in his lap. I sat down and asked him what was going on.

He talked erratically. I listened. He told me life no longer meant anything to him. I told him that people loved him and that he meant a lot to them. These friends in this room, staying awake in the middle of the night with you, don't want you to check out.

He went on with his rant about unhappiness. I listened and listened. And then told him he had a choice. He could stay alive or take his life and we probably couldn't stop him now or ever. *But, I said, we'd much, much rather you stay.*

It took hours but eventually he calmed down. The dark spell passed. And as far as I know he is still alive today.

In case you didn't know, the impulse for suicide in many cases passes fairly quickly. Yes, some of those who try once will try again. But most won't. Our job is to urge people to stay alive. We need them to stay with us. And they owe it to their future self to stay on.

A few years after that midnight visit, one of our own parishioners took his life. There was no midnight cry for help. No obvious foreshadowing. Only in hindsight could we see the signs.

He had been a U.S. Marine, a Second Lieutenant in the Vietnam War. Intelligent beyond brilliance. Healthy and sound of mind, or so it seemed. But he left behind a wife and three young children. We mourned his death and celebrated his life here in the sanctuary. And then he was tenderly laid to rest in Elmwood Cemetery.

In another era he would have been denied a Christian burial.

In some places, that's still the case. In some places suicide is considered a mortal sin and the victim and their family are stigmatized, punished and condemned.

Last month Sarah, age 47, a child of this town, also brilliant and radiant, full of promise, took her life after multiple attempts over 10 years. Mental illness and addiction darkened her mind.

A week ago Saturday, Ben, age 32, another child of this town, took his life at Rumsey Monument. And this past Monday, Robin Williams, one of the most joyous personalities we've ever seen.

All of this prompted me to read Jennifer Michael Hecht's book: *Stay: A History of Suicide and Philosophies Against It*.

All suicides are not equal. Some who hasten the inevitable by their own hand have done so as a form of end-of-life management; not out of despair over life's futility. Hecht carefully distinguishes between those two kinds of suicide.

It's for those like Robin Williams and the young people I just mentioned that she writes in the hope that, despite the darkness in which such people live, they may hear real voices saying: *Stay. We need you. We love you. You are part of our community.*

Depression is no trifling matter. Yes, for some it is like a cold that will pass but for most it is like cancer that won't go away. We owe it to **such** troubled souls to muster mental health resources to give them a chance the way we muster resources to give those with cancer or heart disease a chance. (To tell you the truth: our nation needs to spend less on finding ways to kill people and more on finding ways to heal people.)

Hecht's book surveys changing attitudes toward suicide. In the Greek and Roman cultures, in some cases, suicide was considered honorable and even celebrated in art and literature, such as the Roman woman Lucretia and the Greek philosopher Socrates.

But suicide must not be romanticized or glorified as some philosophers and poets have done. Suicide leaves an irreplaceable hole in the beautiful fabric of the world and the community in which the deceased once lived.

The church itself took root within the Roman culture and initially accepted suicide in part because Jesus' death was interpreted as such based on his words: *I take up my life and I lay it down of my own will. No one can take it from me.*

But that attitude would change.

By the 4th century, the church would condemn suicide as murder in no uncertain terms, a violation of God's commandment against murder and against stealing, robbing God of what belonged only to God. The church assigned suicides to the deepest parts of Hell, even publicly mutilating and displaying their bodies as a deterrent to others who might consider such a thing.

But that would change, too.

In our culture threats of God or Hell are less and less deterrents, which prompted Hecht to write her book, *Stay*.

Over the past hundred years, we have come to better understand the nature of mental illness and the limits of human freedom and will power. Hecht herself, along with many others, I believe, sometimes overrates the powers of the mind and will, as if everyone can calmly and objectively answer the question: *to be or not to be* and then do what the mind says. It's just not that simple or easy for many.

And so, when all is said and done, it is wise and compassionate to stand with the Buddha who said: *always assume every person is doing the best they can with what they have to deal. For no one really knows. No one knows.*

And so to condemn those who do give up on life is to arrogantly pretend to know more than we do. And to give up on ourselves is to arrogantly pretend to know more than we do about our future.

So, we don't give up. We don't give up on anyone while they are alive because we don't know what they still might be able to do. They may have more courage and reasons to live than they realize.

We urge them to try harder, try again, stay with us. We need you. You are part of our community. Don't go away.

The courage and determination to end one's life may be used to face the darkness and live on. That too takes courage and it inspires others to stay on.

And that brings us to the story of Joseph, who had many reasons to end his life. His brothers hated him and sold him to slave traders. He was shackled and oppressed. Why go on living? But he stayed alive and became overseer of an Egyptian lord's estate.

He was framed for a crime he didn't commit and was put into prison. But he stayed alive and upon release rose to become the Pharaoh's chief advisor on how to prepare for a coming famine little knowing that his own brothers and father would themselves be saved by his actions.

Little did he know how his future self would turn out. Nor do we.

But what we can know is this: *in life and in death, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in good days and in bad days, in daylight and darkness, we belong to God. Not to ourselves. But to God and that includes the wondrous web and community of life which itself is God. We belong to all of that and to all of each other.*

Dark times are sure to come as sure as night follows day. But if we listen in the dark we just might hear the Beloved saying to ourselves and to those we love: *you are mine. Now and always you are mine. Stay if you can. But if you can't, I will understand. For I love you and always will.*