

God and Suicide: A Personal Encounter

A Sermon on Luke 13.31-35



Preached the Second Sunday of Lent 2010, three days after the death of the Rev. Jamie Evans, Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Fresno. The Rev. Evans had struggled long and valiantly with clinical depression. The sermon's a biblically-based testimony offered by his close friend, the Rev. Dr. Chris Erdman, Senior Pastor of University Presbyterian Church, also in Fresno. An audio version is available at <http://www.upcfresno.org/sermon/02-28-2010>.

Opening Prayer

O God, who speaks in the whisper of our hearts, send now the fullness of your Holy Spirit into this place. Help us hear your word both to us and to your whole church. Make us obedient, strong, and joyful witnesses to the work you achieved on the third day—your triumph over sin, death, and evil. For in the resurrection of Jesus Christ you destroyed every power that would hold your people captive. In the resurrection rests our hope and our healing. This we pray in the name of the Risen Christ. Amen.

TODAY IS THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT, and in Lent we gather ourselves inside the story of the suffering and death of Jesus. Beyond Lent stands Easter, the Empty Tomb, the resurrection of Jesus—the ultimate triumph of life over death. But on this second Sunday of Lent, the surging life of Easter's still a long way off. Today, the text we read together is dark with death.

1. Life is stronger than death

Some of Jesus' opponents come to Jesus and say: "Look, Herod wants to kill you. You'll high tail it out of here if you know what's good for you."

But Jesus knows his mission; he knows what's good for him. He knows his mission is to face death. He knows the great enemy of all life, all human life, is the reality of death. He knows the one thing he will do that's that better than everything else he could do—better than healing, better than preaching, better than compassion. The Cross and Resurrection are what's good for the world. Nothing will deter him from embracing human suffering and the depth of human despair. Nothing will distract him from entering into Hell itself, breaking Hell's chains, and setting us all free from anything and everything that would hold us.

"Herod wants to kill you," they tell Jesus. And so Jesus knows he's standing on the threshold of his most important work: death is coming for him even as he's coming to Jerusalem. Death will strike Life down, but it will not keep Life down. Death will not keep Jesus down, and it will not keep Jesus' people down. For on the third day Jesus says: "I will finish my work."

So, staring death in the face, Jesus replies to those messengers of death, “Go tell that old fox, Herod—and any other force or agent death chooses to use—that I will live again. Tell Herod that Life will triumph. Tell that old fox that death, though mighty, will not have the last word. For love is stronger than death. Life is stronger than death. Always and forevermore Life will triumph. Go, tell all this to that old fox.”

Life, Jesus tells us, will triumph, but it doesn't always seem so. Death crowds in upon us with its suffocating power. Death seems invincible. It comes for us all. It is brutal. It is cruel. It is fearsome. It is apparently triumphant, mocking these words of Jesus as naïve and futile.

Against death's threats, Jesus comes toward us—like a mother hen—longing to gather us together beneath his wings and comfort us.

Herod, agent of death, is like a fox who prays upon the young and vulnerable of the world. But Jesus, agent of life, is like a mother hen who gathers her chicks in tenderness and compassion, shielding them with her body from danger. It is a tender, compassionate, self-sacrificial God who walks among us in Jesus. It is this mothering God who compassionately gathers us beneath her wings and fiercely protects us from death who is ever stalking us, longing to devour us.

2. The urgency of these words today

This vision of Jesus—Jesus, fearless in the face of death; Jesus, compassionate as a mother hen gathering and protecting her little ones—is an urgent vision in our world today. This message that life is stronger than death is an urgent message today.

Never before has the truthfulness this message been as important to me personally as it is today. Never before have I needed this Jesus—tender as a mother who gathers her vulnerable ones and gather us beneath her wings in tenderness and compassion—never before have I needed this Jesus as I need him today.

Thursday, sometime around noon, my dear friend, the Rev. Jamie Evans, took his own life.

Jamie's preached side by side with me in this sanctuary. I've preached side by side with him among his people—First Presbyterian Church. Jamie was a beloved husband, father, son, brother, friend, pastor, community leader. For me, he was a friend who was closer than a brother.

3. The tragic death of a courageous man

Jamie struggled with anxiety and depression for most of his life. He had an incredibly bright mind, the compassionate soul of a pastor, the courageous heart of a lion—a lion for the faith, hope, and the love of Jesus Christ.

For the past eight years, he and I have met at least once a month, sharing our lives, challenging each other, supporting each other in what can be as difficult a vocation as it can be rewarding. Many senior pastors walk a lonely path; vulnerabilities and weaknesses can be exploited by those they thought they could trust; the burdens of caring for a community in all the joys and pain can be heavy. Many senior pastors keep their cards close to their chests, they guard their hearts.

I remember the first time we met. Jamie was reading *The Economist* magazine. I'd never met a pastor who read the *Economist*. Those first meetings, we'd sit in Starbucks and talk theology, church leadership, evangelism, mission. He could just as easily talk about a difficult trail through the high Sierras as he could talk about the Civil War or the President's foreign policy. With his gifted mind he could remember facts and figures with amazing ability. When he preached he recited his sermon text from memory, no matter how long. As the years passed and we trusted each other more, I learned that

that same great mind was able to manage the ADHD and anxiety that he'd lived with since he was a small child. But this last year, his great mind became treasonous. A deep, clinical depression crippled him. He came to the point he could not longer work. On leave, and away from his post at First Presbyterian Church, he did everything he knew to do to find healing. He was supported by his wife Kristy, his extended family, and a congregation who loved him. In the end he could not find the healing he sought.

"But why *this*?" you ask. "How could a man of such faith and with such support take his own life?" I don't know. I can't know. None of us knows, except maybe those who've faced the same interior terror, stood on the brink of the abyss and for some reason stepped back. I do know that I was able to get him out of the house—three times a week during these last dark months we worked out at the gym. It helped him get back inside his body and out of his head. As we lifted weights, we talked about life as he experienced it from inside his own skin. We talked about the gospel, the love of God for him . . . over and over we rehearsed it. And we talked about what was going on in his own mind.

This last week, Kristy and I both thought he was getting better. We saw more light in his eyes; he'd smile and laugh. We now realize that "better" was an illusion. We now realize that when a person's getting better they actually become more dangerous to themselves, more capable of acting on self-destructive impulses.

So for me, and for others, there's a sense of failure. I feel like I grew lax. And I regret growing optimistic—what could have been a mistake. But I realize that I cannot blame myself; I cannot blame anyone else. My friend's mind was broken. For fifty years, Jamie held off danger by the strength of his mind and the courage in his heart. But this week, even with signs of improvement he couldn't hold it together any longer. He was exhausted. And death seemed to him the only way to find rest.

Jamie's last, desperate act was a cruel, cruel act—to his wife, to his children, to his family, his congregation, his friends, the human community. Look at the ripple effect it has upon us all, the grief and fear it awakens in us. It was cruel, yes, but we must not judge him. I promise you, the torment we feel is only a shadow of the torment within his own mind—the cruelty we experience, only a shadow of the cruelty his own mind inflicted upon itself.

Jamie will be remembered not for this last desperate act, but instead for his strength, his courage, his faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, his life of prayer, his love for his family, his friends, his and children. He will be remembered as a saint who struggled, and who ultimately was held by the faithfulness of God, even if his own faith wavered in the end. He is a saint who was saved by the grace of God. Grace would not be grace if it depended on our ability to receive it.

4. Shining God's light on mental illness

At this moment of great tragedy, I want to declare five gospel truths about the reality of mental illness and how we can go on when those we love take their lives.

First, we must work to ***remove the stigma of mental illness***, a stigma that keeps mental illness secret and hidden and dangerous.

Look, there's no more shame in mental struggle, mental anguish, and mental illness than there is in high cholesterol or high blood pressure. We readily recognize our need for help in other areas of our lives. For God's sake, why then do we consign people whose minds are troubled to the secret and lonely life of walking the road of clinical depression alone? We must end this secrecy! We must throw open the windows of our lives to the fact that to one degree or another we are all troubled, some of us more than others. In fact, there are more reasons to be struggling mentally, emotionally, and spiritually today than there are reasons *not* to. Let's get that into our heads and learn to live more honestly and compassionately

I've personally been in therapy for ten years. Ever since I started at this church—but it's not your fault! (Laughter) There was a time when my therapist said to me at the end of a session, “You know, so-and-so from your congregation is my next appointment and may be in the waiting room as you leave, would you like to go out the back door and have me to schedule you at different times?” I told him, “Thank you, but no. I have nothing to hide. People must know I too am doing the inner work I need to do.”

There's no shame in having your heart repaired surgically or in starting an exercise regime to keep yourself from dying. The real shame would be doing nothing when something needed doing. Neither is there shame in caring for your inner life. The real shame is the shame we've attached to that necessary inner work.

Second, *self-care is not an option*. We all need to learn to practice some kind of vulnerability, some kind of internal awareness of what's going on on the inside of our lives. There are many ways to do this.

Psychotherapy is one way. Not everyone can afford it, I get that. If you don't think you can afford it, are you sure you can't, or is money merely an excuse to avoid the inner work you need to do? If you can't afford it and need it, let one of our pastors know so we can help you. There maybe avenues you don't know about, and we can help provide you a path toward healing resources.

Psychiatric care and proper medication is another path. Many people hesitate to take medication for emotional distress. They fear it will numb them, that they won't be themselves. Well, when you're depressed and don't eat or sleep or can't do what you used to do, are you *yourself*? When you struggle through the day, or avoid people and places you used to enjoy, are you *yourself*? No, you're not. You've lost something of yourself. Look, if you're on medication to fight high-blood pressure the medication's not making you someone other than you are. It's helping you *be* who you are. One of you once put it to me this way: “When my anti-depressant finally kicked in, I felt like I fell back into myself after a long time away.” If you're depressed or anxious then it's time to come back to yourself. Medication is a gift of grace that can help you do just that.

Your faith also gives you gifts for self-care. There's spiritual friendship. There's spiritual direction. There's the honest burden-bearing companionship of one person walking beside another. There are support groups of fellow travelers. In these relationships we learn to open our hearts to one another. We share our lives. We're honest with each other. And as we learn to trust each other we realize that we're not alone in our struggles, there is no shame, and that we've all got wounds that make us limp. There's great strength in these relationships, but to find this strength we must yield our falsehoods and illusions of invulnerability. We must go deeper into our wounds. We must grapple with the pain that's hidden deep within. We must do so together.

Beyond friendship, there's also holy reading and the life of prayer. Scripture, in particular, and especially the Psalms can be a holy companion on this inner journey toward healing. As you know a growing number of our young adults meets at my home for dinner and spiritual conversation every other Monday. We meet again tomorrow. Yesterday, James Orr, a young man with a perceptive heart texted me and said, “I'm so sorry about your loss. I know you're supposed to teach Monday night. Let me handle it. Let me open a Psalm of despair that takes us into our pain, and guides us through it.” Now, that's a gift. That's a young person who knows how Scripture can work. That's a disciple who knows the whole anatomy of the human soul is contained right there in the center of our Bibles—that collection of poems, prayers, and hymns called the Psalms . . . so raw, so real, so ready to guide us into who we are in Christ.

Let us open the Scriptures, not so much looking for answers, but seeking to immerse our lives the

Bible's way of living with pain and living with God. If we read the Bible on its terms, it'll take us to those painful places we don't dare go on our own, and it will take us there with God beside us. You can count on that.

This leads me to another healing resource: the practice of interior prayer—the prayer of the heart. As a congregation we are learning to enter the heart in prayer. We're learning that prayer is more than just saying things to God, asking God for things. Prayer is talking to God, but it is also so much more. It is resting in God until we know deep in our beings that all is well and all shall be well. It is waiting for the holy whisper to rise in the center of our hearts, reminding us that God *is*, and that God is *enough*. When we enter the interior landscape of our hearts we meet Jesus Christ there—we grow in our awareness of who we are in Christ. The Holy Spirit exposes those parts of ourselves that are false. The Holy Spirit shines a holy light on the illusions that masquerade as truth. The Holy Spirit awakens us to see the masks we're prone to wear. The Holy Spirit is always praying within us, calling us to embrace who we are made to be in Christ Jesus.

We have so many resources for self-care. Let's embrace them so that we who suffer might find companionship and healing, and so that those who suffer in our midst might not walk alone.

And elders, I call upon you as our congregation's leaders to join me in a new commitment to give birth to a broadening ministry of recovery and spiritual self-care groups so that those who are hurting may find the healing Christ offers to all.

Third, ***those who are in great mental and emotional pain need community***. This follows from what I've just said about self-care, but it needs reinforcement.

We must become more educated about the signs of mental illness, and more able to recognize those signs in those around us, as well as in ourselves. Let's face it; we're not very aware of what's going inside the skin of others, let alone ourselves. Our faces are buried in our cell phones; we're glued to computer and TV screens. Our minds are fixated on the thought parade that never ceases to march through our brains. The noise of this modern world drowns out true awareness. We look but cannot see; we hear but do not listen; we walk the paths of daily life but aren't very aware of what's really going on around us.

When you're aware, truly aware, you slow down. You listen. You see things others, in their busyness and distraction, do not see. You sense what others cannot sense. Awareness is the ability to see beneath the surface, to detect the subtle changes in the emotional climate within you and within those around you. You see it in their eyes. You hear it in the tone of voice. You sense it in their touch.

Awareness is a particularly Christian virtue—a way to be fully here, to be completely in this present moment because you know God holds all things, you know God loves this world, and you know God is at work to bring about the goodness we all seek.

Awareness is necessary for community. You cannot build a community when you're distracted. But when you're aware, you have eyes for others. When you're aware, you discern the ways you can help. When you can turn away from what distracts you, you—like Jesus—will gather the wounded in tenderness and compassion.

Let us become a community where no one suffers alone, vulnerable to that old fox, Death, who hunts the isolated and lonely.

Fourth, ***we can help carry those who are hurting but we cannot in the end, heal them***. Jamie and I worked out on Wednesday morning the day before he took his life. While lifting weights, he talked

himself through the gospel of Christ's love and presence in his life all over again. We explored the progress he was making, even some of his plans for the future. And when we left each other he said, "Thanks for being my friend. This is helping me." He'd said that just about every time we left each other these last few weeks. But this time I said, "Brother, this is what friendships are made of. You carried me in the darkest moments of my life. Now it's my turn to I carry you."

The next day he took his life. But I still believe those words. I helped carry him as he'd helped carry me. But ultimately, I couldn't carry him into the healing he needed. Neither could his wife, his children, or anyone else. We could not heal Jamie, no matter how hard we may have tried. Ultimately we can help people heal themselves, but we cannot heal anyone. That fact must not excuse us from trying—all I've said up to this point summons us to more involvement, not less. We can do more than we've done in the past to fight mental illness. But in the end we're not God.

Now listen to me here, this may be the most important thing I say today.

When we can't carry the other person toward healing, and when they can no longer carry themselves; when their inner torment drives them to such despair that death tempts them to believe that suicide is the only way out, the only way to find rest; when a loved one slips through our hands—we must remember that those who take their lives are never, ever lost to God.

Suicide, no matter what you may have heard from religious people, is not the unforgivable sin. God welcomes these broken minds and bodies with compassion. Like a mother hen who gathers her chicks in tenderness and compassion, shielding them with her body from danger, so God in Christ gathers and protects these tragic dead from every accuser, even from the sharp arrows of our owned agonizing anger. Jesus Christ is their advocate not their accuser. Jesus Christ is their Savior not their judge.

Religious people have often told us that suicide is unforgivable. Why? Because they think that by scaring the hell out of us we won't take our own lives. I've got news for them. That tactic doesn't work. It only creates more guilt, more misery, more fear. And fear saves no one. Only love can save us. Fear only makes its converts the tragic children of fear, but fear can never carry the soul to God.

The love of God, the forgiveness of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the power of grace are better, more powerful forces against the despair that afflicts those suffering from mental anguish. But even when grace cannot keep a soul from suicide, suicide cannot keep a soul from God's grace.

Fifth and finally, ***we cling to the urgent message of Jesus***. We cling to the central truth of the Christian faith. Jesus says to that old fox, Death: "I will rise again. I will rise in spite of you. Nothing can hold me captive. And nothing can hold my people captive."

Saint Paul said, "Death, death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?"

There's plenty of sting in death, but there is no victory. Ultimately, brothers and sisters, the victory is in Jesus Christ, who has triumphed over sin and death. And so we rise—even in our grief, even in the face of an incredible onslaught of evil and darkness, even when our minds are broken—we rise in Jesus Christ. We rise in the triumphant hope declared here in this Meal now set before us, the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We are in Christ, we are held by Christ, and Christ will never let us go!

So, today let us come to this Table and bind ourselves to the wonder of the mystery of God's triumph of life over death in Jesus Christ. We will grieve, but we will also feed on hope. And so, well fed, we will refuse to hide our pain, minimize the pain of others, ignore the signs of mental illness, and instead we will become a community that sustains each other and empowers each other and loves each other in the midst of this world's enormous pain.

We dare to live in hope because Christ is with us! Christ is within us! And in the end, Christ will triumph over all! Amen.