

I DON'T KNOW MUCH

Pastor James Winderlich

Lutheran Media provides Face to Face presenters with a great deal of freedom when writing radio scripts. There are times when specific themes are suggested, but even then we have the choice of taking up those themes or selecting our own. This month I was asked to write a script on the issue of mental health.

This theme sparked my interest. Mental illness is topical and talking about it from the point of view of Christian faith would challenge me. The more I considered it, however, the more I was tempted to exercise my option to choose another theme.

My growing reticence came as the result of a dawning reality. As I considered what I might say I came to a disturbing realization: *I don't know much.*

I've never been diagnosed with, nor treated for a mental illness. I've never experienced any sort of mental illness in the lives of my family or my close circle of friends. I've never been in any situation where I was required to offer any intensive, long term care and support for a person suffering from a mental illness. In short, *I don't know much about mental illness.*

Sure, I've attended awareness raising conferences, I've read articles and reports, and I've been exposed to various campaigns offered through the media. I've also provided pastoral care to people who suffer from mental illness as well as their families, but this has always been in a very general sort of way. I've rarely dealt with the specific conditions of any particular illness. If I was asked to offer any sort of considered opinion on mental illnesses and the people who suffer from them I would be at great risk of insulting those people, and of severely embarrassing myself. In all truth, *I don't know much about mental illness.*

But this is what I do know. I do know what it's like to feel a little freaked out when an obviously disturbed person gets on an all-but-empty bus late at night. I do know what it feels like to feel annoyed and even resentful when a person who, so obviously, should be living in managed care asks me for money. I do know what it feels like to avoid eye contact and even to fight the urge to cross to the other side of the street when some poor soul is walking towards me, all the while shrieking at the persistent and taunting voices inside of his or her head. I know the quietly grinding irritation when a work colleague takes yet another sick day due to mental health reasons when, from my perspective, they fail to exhibit any obvious ailment. I'm constantly tempted to think to myself, "Get over it, would you!"

What I'm suggesting is this. I, along with a very large percentage of the Australian population who don't know much about mental illness, struggle to articulate any sort of humanity let alone spiritual integrity when it comes to living with people who are suffering from mental illness. To admit this makes me feel uneasy with myself and more than a little ashamed. I want to treat all people with Godly dignity. For me it's a spiritual mandate, but to put it into practice with any sort of uprightness leaves me falling a long way short of any reasonable mark.

And so what I say is said for the majority of us to consider. We are people who don't wish anyone harm, people who always try to do the right thing. But we are also people who know deep down inside that we are of very little, immediate help to people who might be suffering from a variety of mental illnesses.

Why are we like this? Very few of us would admit to being cruel people. We don't like to cause suffering, let alone see suffering in the lives of other people. Even fewer of us would admit to any sort of bigotry. But to be honest, middle class bigotry seems to be where this is heading. Why do so many of us fail to respond in any sort of helpful way when it comes to caring for people who may be suffering from a broad range of mental illnesses? Why is it that we can so easily be threatened and even offended by their presence but so less often affronted by their suffering? Why do we look away?

These questions are important to me on two levels. The first is a purely spiritual one. How can I put my spiritual faith into credible action? Action, that has at its very core the desire to bring glory to God by offering God's love to other people. The second level has purely humane pragmatism behind it. How can I honestly expect the world to become a better place if I and people like me fail to bring our fears under control? And it's here that I might push the envelope a little harder by calling it irrational fear. I have never been personally threatened, let alone harmed by any person suffering a mental illness. My fears and sense of threat have no basis apart from my own sordid imagination.

So, how do we change?

I suspect that changing the way we relate to other people begins with changing how we think about ourselves. Fear and bigotry begins with seeing, or believing that we see differences. We search for what is not there, or what we think shouldn't be there in another person. Is it possible that many of us want to form, or at least encounter other people in our own images?

One of the Bible writers named Paul commented on interpersonal attitudes. He said:

¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.
Philippians 2:1-4 NRSV

Paul connects faith with practical outcomes in this short passage. In it he imagines a unified community. It's a community who celebrates unity in the fullness of its diversity. Such unity doesn't come as the result of anyone's efforts but as the result of God's gifting presence with people. Hear the words again:

- *any encouragement in Christ,*
- *any consolation from love,*
- *any sharing in the Spirit,*
- *any compassion and sympathy,*

These are the precious rewards of God's nature and presence with people. And how is all of this put into practice? By being present with and for each other:

- *be of the same mind,*
- *having the same love,*
- *being in full accord and of one mind.*

God's presence with us draws us to see each other. Because God is present we don't have to look away for any reason. God's presence compels us to act in selfless love because "[God's] perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18 NRSV)

Paul rounds off the tension between what we fearfully feel the urge to do and what God's presence makes us able to do by saying:

- *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,*
- *in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*
- *Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.*

I wrote this script for what is likely to be the majority of us who struggle with the mental illness experienced by other people. On a surface level, how are we going to respond with a sense of humanity and decency? On a deeper, spiritual level, what healing, wholesome and joy producing change are we prepared to anticipate and work for? I suspect that confidence and satisfaction in effective medical interventions and tight public health policy won't do it for us. We are still afraid and too easily look away.

I think that we need to return to the writer Paul. Change doesn't begin with what we think, value and fear about other people. It begins with what we see when we look at ourselves. For me, to admit that my fearful attitude comes from bigotry is where it begins. Such an admission only threatens and detracts from how I want other people to see me, and how I want to see myself. Such an admission leaves me feeling empty. And that's where Paul says that my and our change needs to begin:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:5-8 NRSV

In all truth, I don't know much about mental illness. I know a lot about being afraid of people who experience them. I suspect that a lot of us know that fear. That leaves us empty, so let's begin from there and anticipate the joy that God's presence with us offers. It's a joy that comes from an unimaginable unity found not in eye-contact-avoiding fear but in the fullness of God's fully engaging love.
