

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sept. 17 & 18, 2016

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The Demon is Mental Illness

We know today that the persons with “unclean spirits” who hung out “near the tombs” were social outcasts; folks different from the rest of society who were shunned by all. In Jesus’ time these individuals at times were often called demons. We today believe that these persons were most probably individual with mental illness. If you visit our nation’s first mental asylums in Williamsburg Virginia you will see the locked jail cells, chains and other restraints used to deal with folks who are different. We have our own version of the tombs today.....filled with God’s people who have been marginalized and abandoned. We see it today with well-meaning Christians who are supportive of helping people except when it comes to putting “one of those group homes” in their neighborhood. Mental illnesses are physical illnesses inside one’s brain yet still today that term evokes fear and worry. The demon is the illness; not the person. One in four families are affected by mental illness; mental illness is a family affair.

“We got to run.....we have to hide.....they are going to kill us” Many, many years ago this was my introduction to Mental Illness. I had studied to be a Graymoor Friar for 6 years and then went into social work; I was in no way prepared for this journey. My late ex-wife’s waking up in the middle of the night yelling and screaming about something which for her was all too real.....my oldest daughter running, crying to me “what’s the matter with mommy”. This would be followed by nights without sleep and me having to hide all the phones in the house because of my wife’s calling people at 2 or 3 in the morning to say hi. There were many emergency visits to the VA ER and so on.....the demon is mental illness.

I’m Joe Ridgway and I’m here to talk very briefly my experience as a family member with a late ex-spouse and a wonderful daughter who has a mental illness. I’m also here to talk about a wonderful organization called NAMI-Syracuse. My wonderful wife Judy and I have spent our lives working with persons diagnosed with a mental illness. There are no mentally ill people.....there are persons diagnosed with mental illness. My mental illness is not who I am.that’s part of the stigma of mental illness. We don’t say “diabetic people” or “cardiac people”there’s never a headline “arthritic assaults persons downtown”. I myself have 2 mental health diagnoses.....Major Depression and Anxiety Disorder. My 87 year old mother in Canada has never spent a night alone due to her severe anxiety; mental illness is genetic. I’m not symptomatic now but I have my Prozac and Buspar nearby. Years ago I was very depressed and suicidal....I had bought a rope and was ready to hang myself. The demon is the illness. During my career I have had 7 persons.....I much prefer that term to “patients”successfully complete suicide. Men try much more often than women and are much more successful due to the means they use.....guns, cars and hanging. I’ll never forget

the day 12 years ago this past April when I met with Donna and her husband Ron at 6pm; things seemed to be improving for them as a couple and I was encouraged. At 11 o'clock that night Donna called me screaming.....Ron had gone out to the shed and blown his head off with a shotgun.....the demon is mental illness. April is the cruelest month; there are more suicides in April than any month.

I've brought with me a sign that I have displayed in my office.....be yourself. Fr. Fred has wonderfully and repeatedly talked about the need for us to love ourselves as God loves us. One of the biggest challenges that people with mental illness face is stigma.....from society and from themselves. When I was in therapy with a wonderful ex-priest he often used the term "shilts"a combination of shame and guilt. Often persons with a mental health challenge blame themselves for this biological condition.....hating themselves for who they are. Often they feel that they are an embarrassment to their families.....persons with severe debilitating depression are told to "get over it" or "pick themselves up by their bootstraps." This, of course, only makes folks feel worse about themselves and who they are.....and who they aren't. Society tells them that they should be this or that and they aren't.

NAMI Syracuse is a wonderful grass roots organization. It is comprised of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers of persons with mental health challenges. Some of its most important members are individuals who themselves are consumers of mental health services. Judy and I run a support group for spouses or significant others of individuals with mental illness; we have both been there. NAMI Syracuse promotes research, hope and recovery. There is recovery; I tell folks that I am living, breathing over-eating proof that there is recovery. NAMI sponsors 2 educational conferences a year; this October will be the "adult conference" and this Spring will be the children's conference. Next Sunday will be the NAMI Hopela; it will be held in the Bishop Harrison Center. Judy will explain more about that later.

In closing I would like to share one my favorite Dr. Seus poem.....I find it very useful in trying to normalize folk's feelings and thoughts:

"Some days are yellow.....some days are blue. On different days I'm different too. You'd be surprised how many ways I change on different colored days. On bright red days how good it feels to be a horse and kick my heels.! On other days I'm other things. On Bright Blue Days I flap my wings. Some days of course feel sort of Brown.....then I feel slow and low, low down. Then comes a Yellow Day. And wheeee I am a busy, buzzing bee. Grey Day.....everything is grey. I watch.....but nothing moves today. Then all of a sudden I'm a circus seal! On my orange days that's how I feel. Green Daysdeep, deep in the sea. Cool and quiet fish that's me. On purple days I'm sad. I groan. I drag my tail. I walk alone. But when my days are happy pink It's great to jump and just not think. Then come my black days. Mad. And loud. I howl. I growl at every cloud.

Then comes a Mixed-up day and WHAM....I don't know who or what I am. But it all turns out all right you see. And I go back to being.....me."

May our loving and caring God gives us the courage to accept ourselves and each other.