

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

August 17, 2014

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 8:18-39
Pentecost 10

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NOTHING!

What a week it's been!

It began a week ago Saturday with shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson MO and the ensuing events and escalating commentary. Then there was Robin Williams' suicide on Monday; Lauren Bacall's death on Wednesday; Market Basket standoff ultimatums offered and ignored. And that's just here in the United States....

And when I read the assigned Bible readings for today – I just didn't receive a Word from the Lord that seemed to speak to the week we've had – or at least the week I'VE had.

So this morning I'd like to gather a couple events of the week into a reflection that does ask the question we always ask on Sunday morning, "What does God have to say about that?" (Which, frankly, is a question we ought to be asking every day – not just on Sundays....)

For me, the two major events of the week that have occupied my mind have been the death of Robin Williams, by suicide, and the ALS ice bucket challenge; which share in common suffering at the hands of a horrible disease or illness.

Robin Williams, we are told, suffered from Bi-Polar disorder, which used to be called Manic-Depressive disorder; because people who have it tend to swing from extreme highs of joy and productivity to extreme lows and the inability to function. He also suffered from drug and alcohol addiction and was recently in rehab again. Clearly he was a complicated man whose life and impact were immeasurable, and which can in no way be summarized here.

Throughout the week I've read commentaries and watched tributes. There has been an outpouring of information and awareness around Bi-Polar disorder and depression. For those who have experienced depression or suicidal thoughts, we find ourselves reliving those times and feelings with a deeper knowing. For those who have suffered because a family member or friend is depressed or has taken their own life, we carry a particular burden of pain and compassion.

One branch of my family tree suffered from severe mental illness; and when I was a senior in high school, my cousin committed suicide. (Jeff was 23 years old.) He suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and was institutionalized at the time. His brother, my cousin Michael, also had a psychotic break in his mid-20's and he is and will be institutionalized for life (also schizophrenic).

Since Robin Williams' death, I've read some really helpful reflections, and some really hurtful ones. And when these topics rise to the surface, I feel compelled to speak loudly and clearly as a Christian and on behalf of the Christian faith. Because misunderstandings about Christianity and suicide abound.

So here it is – what the Bible says about suicide – let me read it straight out:

Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture.

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us. (Romans 8:36-39, The Message)

And while the Bible tells of people who commit suicide, it says nothing of their eternal destinies because of it. It is simply not true to the Bible to say that that people who commit suicide go to hell.

The claim that suicide will land you in hell, derives from the Roman Catholic tradition and their assertion that suicide = murder, and murder is a mortal sin which can only be forgiven by confession. And since no confession is possible, that person cannot be "saved" for and into eternal life with God.

But it's not that simple. Suicidal thoughts are part of a complex web of other feelings and experiences outside of the person's control – whether mental illness or abuse – so it may not fall so neatly in the category of murder. And while the Catholic tradition does acknowledge the complexity of it; still, the simple statement *if you commit suicide you go to hell*, is believed by both Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Clearly God's desire for all people is health and wholeness, a rich web of relationships, and a whole life which brings glory to God who made us in the first place.

That that endeavor is never perfectly achieved is no surprise to God either – in fact He came to earth to become human to show us how much he understands how hard it is. And in the person of Christ, God himself, EXPERIENCED in the flesh the deepest of pain – torture by human hands, and the abandonment of God the Father, who let it happen.

Jesus knows how helpless we feel when our world –
the world both close at hand: the stress of our daily lives, families, school, jobs, finances, relationships;
and the world out there: wars and rumors of wars, and shootings and riots and refugees and terrorists,
when these worlds start pressing in on us and we just can't take it any more –
turn it off, shut it down, go into our room and pull the covers over our heads...

Jesus knows, God cares, the Holy Spirit sighs with us and for us...

Nothing!

Nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us. (Romans 8:39, The Message)

Rest in this truth and be encouraged. And be on the lookout for how you can encourage those who need some loving support and compassion.

Which brings us to the ALS ice bucket challenges which have been going on for a month or more now. While the origins are not quite clear, the gist of it is this: people are "nominated" by their

friends to join in the ice bucket challenge – which is simply taking a bucket of ice water and dumping it over their head – filming it and sharing it on facebook or twitter. And then nominating 3 more friends to do the same You only have 24 hours to accept the challenge once you've been nominated. To get out of taking the plunge you're supposed to donate \$100 to the ALS Association. If you do pour the water on, you're still to make a donation – though smaller (\$10 or \$25). What started as something small and silly, has exploded – with hundreds of thousands of participants!

ALS is more commonly known as Lou Gherig's Disease – named for the famous baseball player who played for the Yankees in the 20's and 30's. ALS is a motor neuron disease in the same family as MS and Parkinsons. It causes your voluntary muscles to stop working, while your involuntary systems (heart, digestive system, lungs) remain unaffected. And the mind remains untouched as well. You become a body that cannot move, while your bodily functions carry on.

There is no treatment and there is no cure. It affects each person differently – some die within the first year, most live between 2 – 5 years, and some live for many years. Steven Hawking the well-known scientist has it.

So this ice bucket challenge has had a phenomenal impact on donations to ALS research. I've seen different numbers reported in different places – one article said that the ALS Association had received \$5.5 million dollars during a 2-week period, that last year had received \$32,000.

Since ALS awareness is in the air and ice water is splashing all over facebook, I thought I'd share with you my dad's journey with ALS. He died in 2001 at the age of 68, just 4 short months from his diagnosis. Four months from diagnosis to death is EXTREMELY rapid – his doctors had never seen such a quick deterioration. In February he was skiing at Whistler-Blackcomb, in March he was diagnosed, and in July he was dead.

Looking back though, we figured that he probably had it for a couple years. In the summer of 1999, he noticed that his golf drives weren't going as far as usual. Though in August of '99 we spent 3 weeks trekking in the high Andes of northern Peru. (Go figure!) We think that because he was so fit and strong, it took a long time for the symptoms to make a significant enough impact to affect his life.

As a medical doctor, he knew that his diagnosis was a death sentence. I'll never forget his phone call from the hotel at the Mayo Clinic when he received the formal diagnosis.

In the weeks/months that followed he suffered physically and emotionally – plunged into a depression and a desire to die by his own means rather than allow the disease to continue to assault his body. More gut wrenching phone calls across the miles....

As mom struggled to keep up with his decline in mobility, inability to sleep or be comfortable at all, friends and family started reaching out. People he hadn't seen in years and years called, emailed, and got on airplanes. It was beautiful. And even though he'd been retired for 11 years (disability due to severe hearing loss), his colleagues were right there with him. And it was with their support and counsel that he was able to accept the illness, as well as the palliative and hospice care that would help him die well.

He and mom came to Massachusetts in June and he got to fly with Mike! That Sunday morning I remember sobbing through Communion as I sat with him in the pews, rather than my usual seat up front.

At the end of July, he went into the hospital with breathing difficulties (it was a Wednesday or Thursday); and early Sunday morning they called – I needed to get on the first plane home I could get. I preached a few hours later, was on a plane to Milwaukee by noon, and by his side by 3:00pm. He still could not get comfortable and we decided that he'd be released from the hospital to go home with hospice care.

Monday morning the custom wheel chair people came to make final adjustments to the chair we'd ordered a few weeks before, and we signed discharge papers. Dad was blessed in that he never lost speech/swallowing and was speaking clearly all morning. I fed Dad lunch and left to go to the house to start calling more family to fly in ASAP.

I hadn't been gone 2 hours when my mom called, "Get back to the hospital now!" When I arrived to his room, he was unconscious. I asked the nurse, "Can you bring him back?" The tears in her eyes were her answer. "Then take off the oxygen please..."

Mom and I were holding his hands, his brother Roy was at the foot of the bed. It was a good death; and he knew into whose hands he was dying.

ALS is a horrific disease; Bi-Polar Disorder is horrific; addiction is horrific; and there are MANY horrific diseases. But the people who have them are far more than their disease – they are beloved children of God, with families who love them, and gifts to share to the very end.

And I find it poignant that at a time when there are so many distressing events swirling around, there is also this fun, sort of silly, and actually quite meaningful, movement on the loose as well.

So what does God have to say about all this?
I think he's screaming his loving presence into the world.
I think he's sitting vigil through dark days and long nights.

And I think he's on the move - not just in the world, but in your very lives.
I think he brought you here today to renew your strength, to show you that YOU ARE NOT ALONE. You have each other each other – but more importantly you have Christ.
And because you have Christ you have life and hope.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:39, NIV)

NOTHING!
Amen.