

Sermon: Ordinary Incarnations

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Scriptures: John 13:31-35

The UCC is a denomination that, by and large, celebrates the diversity within it. We like to talk about welcoming folks “no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey.” And we mean that. We dream of churches filled with congregations that are vibrant and diverse, pews brimming with folks who don’t all look like one another, don’t all come from the same background, don’t all identify the same way, and whose experiences of God vary in a great many ways.

We celebrate Jesus’s penchant for reaching across lines of difference, those that would usually separate the masses: healing those considered untouchable, honoring the tireless work and witness of women in a patriarchal society, extending kindness to the Samaritan woman at the well in a time when Jews and Samaritans did not get along, caring for orphans and widows once cast off and ostracized from society, sympathizing with even the prisoner, and defying the religious authorities in favor of a more loving way.

This more loving way is the way Jesus lived, it’s what God mandated when God created all people in God’s image. And it’s more than that: it was also the final commandment he gave to his disciples before he ascended into the heavens. “Love one another as I have loved you.” In John 13:31-35, Jesus gave the disciples a command as he left them. But that command wasn’t just another letter in the law, it wasn’t another rule to tick off a list of things to do to get into heaven, it was the total encapsulation of all that he taught them thus far. His imminent departure from their midst was going to leave behind a gaping Jesus-shaped hole in the world. In making this one final commandment before he left them, Jesus was teaching them how it was that they could begin to fill that Jesus-shaped hole. And it wasn’t complicated.

Love as I have loved.

In our world today, there is a lot of pain. Christians like to say we live in a fallen world, but, having a different interpretation of the second creation story, I prefer to say we live in a broken world bent on following its own way rather than following the way of Jesus. You don't even have to be a Christian to love as Jesus has loved, I know plenty of atheists who do the same thing. In our churches, we try to love as Jesus loved and we do most of the time. But, as they say, there is always room for improvement. One area that does not get much attention in our litany of love for the "other" is how we handle those with mental health issues. As today is Mental Health Sunday, I thought now would be a good time to talk about this.

Dr. Vicki K. Harvey, Board Member, UCC Mental Health Network has said it this way, "arguably, our most significant struggle to love "the other" comes when we are in relationship with one who may look just like us on the outside but inside goes to places we can't fathom or follow."

Mental illness takes many forms. It can be as common as depression or anxiety disorder or as seemingly rare as schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder. We know many people suffer from undiagnosed PTSD from traumas they have experienced, including those who have served our country bravely in war.

People who struggle with mental health aren't hard to find. Most of them aren't even strangers; they are people we know and love, people we interact with every single day. They are our friends, our neighbors, family members, leaders and friends in the church, people we work with, and classmates.

Even those who are healthiest among us must know we, too, are only one trauma away from falling into the grips of the demons so valiantly faced by those we deem to be suffering from mental illness. We know that the thin veil that separates the mentally well from the mentally ill is only too easily torn. And this scares us.

But we are equally fearful of the unknown and, for those who did not spend years studying the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, that's exactly what mental health struggles are: unknown. We worry about the unpredictability of the symptoms of mental illness and how those symptoms might affect

the afflicted. This fear keeps us at a distance, keeps us from living fully into Jesus's last commandment: love as I have loved.

But Jesus knew this kind of love wouldn't be easy, if it was, he wouldn't have needed to make it a commandment, would he? Loving others consistently and continually is difficult. No matter how wonderful you or I may think we are or how loved we actually are by others, there's no possibility that loving us is always easy to do. That's also true of loving the mentally ill: there will be times when that love takes more work. But the thing is, we don't get a pass just because it's tough. When it's hardest, that's when we must love harder. We are called into a lifestyle of mercy and justice and humility—one in which our every action toward others is one that comes from a loving place in the same way Jesus's was. This command to love others isn't optional. It's not open to interpretation: love as I have loved. And we know how Jesus loved because we can see this story told four different times just in the scriptures that the councils have deigned to canonize.

Dr. Harvey shares a few vignettes in which she has seen churches reaching out to and loving the beloveds of God struggling with their mental health and I want to share those with you today:

A woman carrying in supplies for a potluck is approached by a young woman known to monopolize a lot of time with her needy rambles born of isolation and depression. She stops on the spot and sits and talks one on one with her, handing off her food to another. After a while, another woman joins and the first woman takes her leave. Thus, the caring is spread and becomes less burdensome for one person, prompting the urge to avoid the struggling young woman. It ends with several practical suggestions, and promises to follow up later in the week.

We don't need to devise clever ruses or craft new paths from point A to point B to avoid having to interact with those who are struggling in this way. That is not the way of Christ, to leave the suffering awash in a sea of Christians in name only. In the communities we build together as followers of the risen Christ, we are called to a better and more loving way.

A group of marginalized people start attending church. They are noticeable for their adherence to a group that often dresses in odd clothing. They sometimes sit or lay outside as people are arriving for worship. For these behaviors they had been asked to leave their previous church. At the new church people show interest in them, invite them in, get to know them. They are given tasks in the various ministries. At times their struggles make it difficult. They can flash with anger, regress, or become non-communicative. Over the months however, as they find their place within the church family, they decide they don't want to wear their apparel identities. They enjoy bonding and identifying with others as they are, all because people looked past the outside and related to the living soul within.

An older man has been evicted from his home because of his mental illness and bad decisions. The church immediately jumps in with long and short-term solutions for him, everything from countless hours helping him move, to attending court with him to make sure he understands the proceedings, to offering shelter. His self-sabotage gets threaded through the expenditures of time, money, patience of the church community until a roommate is located that, as it turns out, also needs the gifts he has to offer, and together they form a stable unit that benefits both of them.

In our faith, we call Jesus the Incarnation of the living God. The reason Christmas Eve matters so much to us is that it is the day we celebrate the gift of God coming to be among us in Christ Jesus. This is an earth-shatteringly important moment in history, the extraordinary incarnation of God in the birth of the Christ child. But it's not the only kind of incarnation. These acts and so many others like them are incarnations, too. Incarnations of a much more ordinary kind, incarnations of God among us in the people God has created to love and God loves through Jesus. Dr. Harvey calls them, "the visibles of a God indwelling, God outreaching to those with mental illness." These ordinary incarnations are how God's grace can be made visible through us, the Body of Christ in a broken, hurting world. Let us live into this call. Let us call upon the grace freely given to us, that we might share it with those who desperately need to feel the healing power of God-with-us. **Amen.**