

Hot Topics 2014  
*Mental Illness*  
July 27, 2014

**PRELUDE – “The Saving One”**  
**Worship Songs – Immortal, Invisible / Beautiful Things**  
**Intro video**

**Feature - “How to Save a Life”**  
**Feature – “Dark Side” / Kelly Clarkson**

Let’s pray together.

Father God, you do love us even though we are not picture perfect; even though we have our dark sides. And you have promised that you will never leave us or forsake us.

But this morning, some of us walked in here not being able to feel or sense that from You or from anyone else because of the darkness that has overtaken us. We’re hurting; we’re sick; we’re ill – but the disease we carry is not cancer or diabetes or high blood pressure. Our injury isn’t a broken arm or leg. It’s our mind – our brain – that is wounded.

So God, I pray you would begin the process of healing and hope in this time together. And I ask in the name of the one who rose from the grave to deliver us from every effect of sin’s curse, Jesus of Nazareth.

Amen.

Good morning everyone.

As Ladell said, today we’re going to be talking about mental illness ... which certainly does qualify as a “hot topic.” You don’t need to be surfing the net or watching TV for very long until you come across news of the latest tragedy perpetrated by someone with (as they so often put it) “a history of mental illness.”

**(Picture) Just recently, in our own backyard (so to speak), we were shocked when an Atchison, KS man abducted his girlfriend’s five-year-old daughter, then shot and killed her when police surrounded him.**

“Members of his family have said,” The KC Star reported, “that [he] was taking medication for mental health problems.”<sup>i</sup>

A little less dramatically but just as significant, I think, *The Health Care Foundation of Kansas City* reports that this year about one in 10 adults in the Kansas City area (or about a quarter of a million people) will suffer a serious mental illness, which includes major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and anxiety disorders. 40 percent of those cases will go untreated.

Their study conducted in 2012 noted that the annual cost in our area resulting from that lack of treatment is \$624 million.<sup>ii</sup> That's an incredible cost. Nationwide, it's estimated that one in four adult Americans will experience some form of mental illness in any given year.<sup>iii</sup>

But what's most troubling is what's happening to our young people. I'll let Dr. Stephen Ilardi, who is a professor of clinical psychology at KU, explain.<sup>iv</sup>

<END SLIDE SET 1>

**Video – Depression by Age Cohort (1.0 min)**

2:49 The rate of depression seems to be increasing generation after generation ...

3:52 Their lifetime rate of depression will be over 50%.

That's just scary, isn't it?

This is a big deal ... this is a hot topic ... but not just "out there." It's right here in our own congregation. In fact, let me ask you – by show of hands – how many of us either suffer from some kind of mental illness or know someone – family or friend – who does?

When I announced the topics for this series last month, I had more than a few people contact me to let me know they would be willing to share their story if I needed them to. I didn't take anyone up on it because I have my own story. I won't belabor you with the details (since I've told the story before) but, in 1993, shortly after I decided to quit my job at Park Hill Baptist Church and launch North Heartland, my wife Jetta had what used to be called a "nervous breakdown." Literally.

At the time we had no idea what was going on. All we know was that for some reason she could not sleep or eat and was in a constant state of panic. It was like someone flipped on her adrenaline switch and forgot to turn it off. It took weeks before a psychiatrist finally told her that she had become yet another victim of anxiety disorder and she began the long road to recovery; a road which she still walks even today.

Oddly enough, that revelation actually occurred right here in this building – down the hall towards the offices – back before we owned it; back when this facility was a mental health institution – Prairie Hills Hospital. I've always thought it said something about God's sense of humor that we ended up buying this place and turning it into another kind of hospital – a hospital for sinners in need of grace.

Anyway ... all that to say that this is a subject near and dear to my heart. I'm passionate about this because I've seen it up close and personal. I've seen the pain and the shame associated with it, especially among Christians. We Christians are supposed to be perfect, right? We're supposed to never have problems; to always be upbeat and cheerful and happy, right?

But, when you're in the grip of some form of mental illness, that's just not possible and so if you love God and if you're a follower of Jesus, you feel like a real loser; like something must be wrong with you spiritually; that maybe you haven't prayed enough or the right way; that maybe there is some hidden sin in your life for which God (or Satan or demons – which we'll talk about next week) is somehow punishing you.

As I was preparing for this message, I came across a TED Talk by Ruby Wax. She's a British comedienne who several

years ago, had a nervous breakdown, as well, and she's kind of devoted her life and her comedy to talking about this issue and she's become somewhat of an expert on it. She's not a Christian but I liked how she describes the shame and self-condemnation that often comes with mental illness.

Let's watch.

### **Video – Ruby Wax on “Shame” (1.1 min)**

B – Ruby: “I took to my bed for about a month ...”

E – Ruby: “If the devil had Turrets, that's what it would sound like.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

And some of you know exactly what that feels like which is why I want to take a bit of time to think about mental illness from a Christian viewpoint.

## **A Christian Viewpoint**

And by “Christian viewpoint,” I don't mean just throwing out a handful of Bible verses that might apply to the issue. In fact, there really aren't any that speak to it directly because the very idea of “mental illness” *as a medical condition* – a malfunction of the organ we call “the brain” – is a fairly modern concept.

What I mean by “Christian viewpoint” is thinking about the issue holistically – putting it into context of what God is up to in Christ; thinking about mental illness in light of what we know of people, the world, science, and most importantly what we know of the Gospel – the news that even though this world is marred and cursed by sin, redemption is coming – in fact, it's already begun – because of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection three days later.

So, what I'm going to do is to give you five statements about mental illness that I think will be helpful not only for those who suffer from this condition but also for those who love and live with people who are suffering from this condition.<sup>v</sup> And as I give you these statements, you may agree or disagree with me on this and if you do disagree, that's OK. But I would then challenge you (if you are a believer in Jesus) to make sure your opinions are not simply coming from what you heard Dr. Oz say or your own ideas. Your task and mine as Christians, always on these kinds of issues, is to discern and decide as those who belong to Jesus and who are led by the Scripture and by the Holy Spirit.

Here's the first element of a Christian viewpoint on mental illness as I see it.

### **1. Mental illness is a result of the curse of sin (just as every illness is a result of the curse of sin).**

The Bible tells us that when God created the world it was perfect. Sickness and death were not a part of it. But it didn't stay that way.

As one commentator puts it, “sin, that virus of self-centered blindness to the truth and glory of God, has twisted and broken every aspect of human nature, from the clarity of our mental processes to the bio-chemical make-up of our brains.”<sup>vi</sup>

We talk about sin's curse a lot around here (it's a fundamental Christian doctrine) but this is a slightly different perspective. And it means that those who suffer from depression or anxiety or bi-polar disorder or whatever really are

no different from people whose bodies have been damaged by heart disease or high-blood pressure or anemia or some form of cancer. Every part of the human body from head (literally) to toe is susceptible to malfunction because of the curse of sin.

Mental illness is a result of the curse of sin (just as every illness is a result of the curse of sin). I think that's helpful especially to anyone who feels shame or condemnation about that condition.

Here's the second statement.

**2. In some people, mental illness is inherited. In some people it is developed and enhanced. In some people it's both.**

Now, this is not a distinctly "Christian" statement. It's actually a medical statement. But it's one of those areas where Christian theology has been validated by science.

Here's what I mean. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the church at Rome (and this is from chapter 5) ...

*When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Romans 5:12 (NLT)*

Paul says that all of us are under the curse of sin because of what the first humans did. In other words, we inherited the curse from them. But he also says that the curse spread to everyone because everyone sinned. Not only was sin inherited, it was also further developed and enhanced by each human being. So, the reason for the curse is two-fold – somebody did it to us and we did it to ourselves.

And it works the same way with mental illnesses. Scientists have discovered that in many cases, diseases of the mind are passed down genetically. If someone in your family tree had depression or schizophrenia, chances are, you have it or at least are susceptible to it, as well. Your brain chemicals were messed up at birth because of your lineage.

For example, practically speaking, two of our daughters actually have struggled from time to time with anxiety. We knew what it was because we'd seen it before and we realized that it was passed down to them by their momma who, by the way, inherited it from her father who inherited it from his father before him. It's a genetic thing in the Koch family. They did it to my girls. Those dirty rats! Just kidding.

But scientists have also discovered that mental illness sometimes develops as result of lifestyle choices regardless of whether or not there are genetics involved. In other words, we do it to ourselves.

Ruby Wax, in her TED talk, gave a great explanation of how this happens.

<END SLIDE SET 2>

**Video - Ruby Wax on Physiology (1.5 min)**

B – Ruby: "when we were ancient man ..."

E – Ruby: "your pets are happier than you are."

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

Now, you may not agree with Ruby's perspective on evolution. However, her presentation accurately depicts what

scientists have discovered: that *many of us live in a constant state of alarm for which our bodies were not designed*. It's like we flip on our adrenaline switch and then we never turn it off because we never get away from the stimulus. We mess up our brain chemicals all by ourselves.

And that stimulus can come to us in a lot of different ways.

- *Headlines in the news*. People dying in Syria, war in Israel, plane crashes everywhere, Obamacare, details of terrible accidents happening to people thousands of miles away that we'll never meet.
- *Constant connection to information flow*: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, texting, newsfeeds, constantly surfing the net.
- *Unrealistic expectations we place on ourselves or allow others to place on us* – that we or our work or our appearance have to be perfect – or at least better than everyone else on the planet.

That's what tanked Jetta. "I have to be the perfect mom of three little girls, perfect wife of a hard-to-please man (that's me), plus now I have to be the perfect pastor's wife." That plus genetics – it was just too much for the brain chemicals to handle.

We do it to ourselves in many ways including ... deliberate disobedience to how God tells us to live. Again and again in the scriptures we read of men and women who lived counter to God's commands ... and wound up trapped by anxiety (for example, King Saul of Israel had classic signs of an anxiety disorder), depression (King David), and schizophrenia (King Nebuchadnezzar was totally messed up and didn't know who he was for years). Some even committed suicide (Judas).

Obvious question here: if you're suffering from some sort of mental illness, what are you doing to yourself? You might have inherited some things and it's not your fault (they did it to you) but are you enhancing the problem by your own actions?

Here's the next statement that I think reflects a Christian viewpoint on this issue: regardless of how it happens – how much a person's symptoms are a result of inheritance or enhancement ...

### **3. A person is *not* his or her "condition."**

A person who suffers from schizophrenia is not, at the core, a "schizo." A person who suffers from depression isn't, foundationally, a depressive. A person who suffers from bi-polar disorder isn't merely a "bi-polar."

And this is important to recognize not just for people who love and care for those who struggle with mental illness. This is important for *those who struggle* because, in the middle of the struggle, it's so easy to think "this is all there is and ever will be. I *am* my depression. I *am* my anxiety. I am my <whatever>." And when you think that way, if that becomes your identity, it's very hard to come back from.

But, the truth is, you are so much more, especially if you belong to Christ. If you are a believer, the Bible says *that* is your core identity. Everything else from nationality to ethnic background to race to political persuasion to any physical, emotional or mental disorder – is secondary.

That's why the NT is chock-full of reminders to Christians of who they are in Christ. God doesn't want you living out of some false identity. He wants you living out of the truth that, because of Christ and your faith in him ...

- You have been adopted as God's child (see Ephesians 1:5)
- You are free from condemnation (see Romans 8:1-2)
- You cannot be separated from the love of God (see Romans 8:35-39)
- You can be confident that the good work God has begun in you will be perfected (see Philippians 1:6)
- You are a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven (see Philippians 3:20)
- You have not been given a spirit of fear but of power, love and discipline (see 2 Timothy 1:7)
- You are born of God and the evil one cannot touch you.(see 1 John 5:18)
- You are God's workmanship, created for good works in Christ (see Ephesians 2:10)

That's who you are if you're a believer.

Again, an obvious question: what are you telling yourself about who you are? Is your identity in your illness (and not just mental illness, even a physical illness)?

This is why you need Christian community – friends who are living out of the truth who can remind you of the truth. This is why you need church – you need to be reminded by teaching and preaching and worship of the truth of who you are in Christ.

A person who suffers from mental illness is not his or her condition (especially if they are believers in Jesus) ... and because of that:

#### **4. God expects and empowers believers to endure and overcome their mental illness.**

A lot of people who suffer from mental illnesses – because it can be so debilitating – naturally see themselves as victims. It's hard to believe – especially in the moment of a panic attack or another sleepless night or voices that won't stop – that there can ever be victory or progress in their life.

But the Bible paints a very different picture. It says that if you have the mental capacity to believe in Jesus as your savior, God can develop in you the capacity to endure and overcome ... however, that is not the same as being healed from the disease.

There's a very interesting passage in a letter that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about this.

#### **He writes ...**

*In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.*

*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*  
2 Corinthians 12:7-9 (NIV)

Whatever it was that seemed so debilitating to Paul (and it could very well have been depression or anxiety because if you read some of his letters closely, you can see traces of that kind of thinking every once in a while), God didn't take it away. Instead, He told Paul that He would be given the power to endure and overcome in spite of it.

### **As Paul later wrote to the Philippians ...**

*God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19 (ESV)*

God will make it possible for you to do and be what you need to do and be ... even if total healing never comes.

... which leads to the final piece of a Christian viewpoint on this issue:

### **5. Only a degree of mental health is possible under the curse. There is no perfection in this life.**

In other words, in some way all of us are going to struggle from time to time with out of balance brain chemicals. All of us at some time are going to be a little crazy. And those of us who are more susceptible to the chemical imbalances either by inheritance or developing and enhancing it or both, it's highly likely that will always be an issue for us until the day we die.

But, that's how the curse of sin works in general. In any way that you or I have bent by the curse.

### **Paul wrote:**

*In my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. Romans 7:22-23 (NIV)*

*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?*

What a great question! And there's only one way that's going to happen.

*Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:24-25 (NIV)*

Only when Jesus returns will there be full rescue and deliverance... from whatever issues we struggle with.

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Well, those are the five statements that I think make for a pretty good start on a Christian perspective.

And, I realize that a lot of what I just said is pretty heady and you might not absorb it all in one hearing. I mean, I certainly didn't come up with these ideas in one sitting! This is something I've been reflecting on and processing in my own mind for many years.

So, I just want to remind you that if you need to hear this again so you can think about it, you can do so online at the media section of our website. We usually have the service posted sometime on Monday and I'll put up a link to it on our Facebook page tomorrow. We also make all of our messages available through podcast. Search for North Heartland Community Church and subscribe.

## Myths about Meds

Now, I could probably stop here and I think you would have enough to chew on but there's a very difficult (and practical) issue for a lot of Christians that's embedded in this larger issue. And that is ... where does medicine – specifically, anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medications – fit into this picture.

And I know there is a growing controversy (a heated debate, actually) over the use of medication to treat mental illnesses. I don't really know about all that but it's not really the issue I want to deal with. For sake of argument, I'm going to assume that we can trust the FDA and the psychiatrists. In the event that is safe and reasonable to do, how should a Christian look at meds?

Unfortunately, what I've seen over the years is lots of believers buying into one of two myths.

**Myth #1. “If I just had enough faith or did enough <praying, Bible reading, fasting or speaking in tongues, or whatever>, then I wouldn't need this medicine.”**

That, in fact, was what we thought when Jetta first hit this wall years ago. We thought that God would heal her if we prayed more, if we fasted, if we did this or that. She thought that being on meds was a sign of weakness, that “something is wrong with me spiritually.”

Maybe some of you have been through the same thing.

**But here's the truth: Sometimes the physiology of your brain just won't work without meds.**

Tim Keller writes: “While we can't fall into the reductionism of believing all problems are chemically based and require medication, we also cannot fall into the reductionism of believing all problems are simply a matter of lacking spiritual disciplines. Schizophrenia, bipolar depression, and a host of other psychological problems are rooted in physiological problems that call for medical treatment, not simple talk therapy.”<sup>vii</sup>

Dr. Paul Meier, founder and director of Meier New Life Clinics agrees when he writes “meds can be a cop-out, covering up symptoms without resolving root problems. But for severe depression, anxiety, and all genetic disorders, meds are miraculous lifesavers changing people's years of misery to lives of joy in a matter of days or weeks, from psychosis to reality.”<sup>viii</sup>

Question ... are you buying into this myth? You do know don't you that medicine is a gift from God? The first medical researchers and doctors were Christians and Jews. That's why there are so many religiously-oriented hospitals. Using meds is not a sign of a lack of faith.

Here's the other myth that people buy into about meds. It's at the other end of the spectrum.

**Myth #2. “Meds are a substitute for addressing lifestyle issues.”**

Now, you would never hear anyone actually say that. But a lot of us think that – about a lot of things. For example, if there was a magic pill that took all the calories out of donuts, I'd eat a dozen a day. I really would.



And a lot of people do that with anti-depressants and anti-anxiety issues. They just decide to rely totally on the drugs because they make them feel better for a while, thinking there is no need to ever address the fundamental issues.

**But the truth is that meds free us to address lifestyle issues that contribute to mental illness.**

Researchers have determined that brain chemistry can actually be changed by making changes in our patterns of life. You might have been born with a predisposition to mental illnesses and you might not ever get rid of that completely, but you can do some things to improve the condition.

### **Lifestyle Changes**

A lot of research has actually been done into the kinds of lifestyle changes that affect brain chemistry.

In fact, Dr. Stephen Ilardi from KU who we heard from earlier has written a book about a research project he and his team did. I want to show you a short video clip in which he summarizes his findings.

<END SLIDE SET 3>

#### **Video – Dr. Ilardi’s Six Steps (2.0 min)**

B – “Screen Modern Life Leads to Depression Epidemic”

E – “... to the outer world of people and activities that we’re designed for.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 4>

Now, if you want to get his book, it’s available online. We have – or had – a book in our bookstore and library written by one of his students, Roxanne Renee, called “Laughing Again” which covers a lot of the same material.

But as we close, I want to focus for just a few minutes on what he said about not dwelling on negative thoughts and ruminating on ideas and circumstances that produce emotional and neurological toxins; things that mess with our brain chemicals.

The suggestion he made was to turn away from those inner thoughts to the outer world of people and activities – and that’s good advice. That’s part of the reason why I love my small group so much. Every week we get together just to hang out and it pulls me out of myself.

But the Bible says that, in addition to doing that, we need to also change those inner thoughts.

*I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

*Romans 12:1-2 (NIV)*

In other words, get disciplined about your thinking. Start – and continue - thinking about your life in a new way. See yourself as a child of God who has new purpose on this earth. That you are here and God loves you. You’ve received this mercy and your life is to be set in worship to Him. Start thinking this way because that’s what will change you, that’s what will transform you. In fact, scientists have discovered that changing thought patterns over time can actually change the make-up of the brain. Not only can the chemicals affect what you think, you can affect the chemicals by

what you think. It's a two-way street which, again, is why the Bible continually tells us to think about what we're thinking and to take control of those thoughts.

Practically speaking, that means you've got to start putting good stuff intentionally in your head instead of the bad.

- Some of you need to print out the five statements I made earlier and tape them to your bathroom mirror. Every day you need to have those truths as the framework in your mind.
- Some of you need to stop listening to so many of the tragic things going on in this world. Stop being a news junkie. Stop surfing the web and reading the news on Fox or MSNBC. And you need to start listening to worship music like we sang earlier in the service. You need to go to Christian radio or Pandora and start putting that stuff into your brain.
- Some of you need to find some Christian friends instead of the whiny bad influences you hang out with and you allow them to pour all kinds of crap into your head, about you and about life and ... it makes me nervous just thinking about it.
- Some of you just need to remember over and over and over that God is for you and not against you because of what Jesus did for you – not your current circumstance – but because of what he did for you.

As we bring this to a close, I want to give you a chance to experience this kind of thinking. I'm going to show you a short video based on a very famous passage of scripture. As you watch it, personalize it. Let it wash over you. Let it work on your brain.

Here we go.

**Video - Psalm 23 Animation (1.9 min)**

B – Black dot ... “The Lord is My Shepherd”

E – “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Music ends.

Let's pray together.

<prayer>

**Closing Comments**

1. AL Volunteers needed

- a. One of the greatest things we do here is ministry to kids thru AL program.
- b. Next Sunday, we fire it back up with our regular program and volunteers.
- c. Need 5-7 volunteers who will commit to serve one hour a week for various age groups.
- d. Greatest need is at 11am. Come to church at 9:30 then serve at 11am.
- e. The reality is if we don't have these folks we will not be able to open all of our rooms. We will have to turn kids away.
- f. Info in the program of how to get in touch w/Julie Smoltd, our director of Children's ministry

2. Offering@door – “summer slump” in giving ... could really use your support

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Read more here: <http://www.kansascity.com/news/local/crime/article778298.html#storylink=cpy>

<sup>ii</sup> Read more here: <http://www.kansascity.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/lewis-diuguid/article346983/The-high-cost-of-untreated-mental-illness-hurts-Kansas-City.html#storylink=cpy>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.nami.org/factsheets/mentalillness\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.nami.org/factsheets/mentalillness_factsheet.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drv3BP0Fd8>

<sup>v</sup> Points 1,3 and 5 are from [http://www.bmei.org/brmm/vol10no4.php#Achieving Mental Health: The Role of Psychotherapy, Drugs, and Religion](http://www.bmei.org/brmm/vol10no4.php#Achieving%20Mental%20Health:%20The%20Role%20of%20Psychotherapy,%20Drugs,%20and%20Religion)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/the-christian-and-mental-illness-iv-is-there-mental-illness-in-the-bible>

<sup>vii</sup> Quoted at <http://pastors.com/meds-vs-spiritual/>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/current-events/features/1557>