

## Homily Notes by Deacon Tom Lambert, Archdiocese of Chicago Commission on Mental Illness

- We are spiritual people who have God at the center. When we look at the whole person – mind, body, and soul – the person becomes whole. When we consider the whole person, the person goes from being known as an illness to becoming a person who, by the way, has an illness. After all.....No one wants to be known as an illness and no one should be defined solely by the illness they have ---- rather we all should be known for the person we are - People with dignity, people with gifts to offer others, and people who can contribute to make the world a better place.
- We also know that when we put God at the center of our lives, our lives become joyful and able to meet any challenge we face. I see this over and over again in people who face mental illness, in families who deal with mental illnesses, in friends and in professionals who help us.
- In our Gospel, Jesus teaches the two great commands: First - Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your mind. Which is to say we put God at the center of our lives - And the second command - You shall love your neighbor as yourself. That is treating others as we want to be treated – a person with dignity and value. Jesus tells us - Everything depends on these two commands.
- Jesus Christ's way of life, the example He gave us, taught us that these two commands – loving God and loving neighbor – are actually responses to God's love for us. God loves us unconditionally and when someone loves you unconditionally our natural response is to love them back in the same way - as best we can. You may have experienced that through a family member or a good friend. When we feel that love for us, we want to share that love with others, to treat others as we want to be treated.

When faced with a mental illness or any illness, it can be overwhelming dealing with both the illness and –sadly- the stigma that some people have about the illness. It can isolate us and even imprison us in our own grief and sorrow.

In her book “Sacred Therapy: Jewish Spiritual Teachings on Emotional Healing and Inner Wholeness” Estelle Frankel says "Spiritual healing is essentially about breaking out of the narrow prison of our own personal heartbreak to enter the heavenly palace of compassion and connection. It is about how the human heart can be broken open, so that the veils that keep us separate from one another and from our connection to the divine can be removed."

In other words, when we love each other as God loves us, unconditionally, we connect with God and each other. We move beyond the illness we have..... I call that the joy of living the gospel, the joy of being and having a true friend. There is no greater joy than being part of a community that loves you and supports you.

### **EXCERPTS FROM MASS AT HOLY FAMILY PARISH**

Mental illnesses, such as depression, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, post traumatic stress, among others are far more common than many think. The National Institute of health says one in four people in any given year deal with a mental illness and for one in 17 it is a serious and persistent illness. These illnesses are a no fault disease!! No one wants to be mentally ill and it's not something you can just pull yourself out of. Just as you wouldn't tell a person with cancer to just get over it, if you have severe depression or any major mental illness you can't just pull yourself out of it. You need help. It also affects more than the person who has the illness. It affects their family and friends as well.

People and families are suffering because of disjointed and underfunded systems of care that exist in our communities. That lack of continuity of care causes cycles of crisis within families. The sad result is that sometimes families are broken apart because of their inability to get help. Tragically, sometimes when people don't get the help they need they wind up on the streets, or in jail, or commit suicide.

People with mental illness and their families need help. And help is out there. But it sometimes takes a lot to find it and if you're a person or family going through a crisis, it's tough to do that on your own. Also, there is still a stigma of having these illnesses that often keeps people and families from seeking help.

Which is why families need our help and support. One of the keys to recovery is a supportive community that nourishes a person's faith in God. You and I know something that the psychiatric community is now beginning to acknowledge.... that is that our spiritual lives are a key part of being whole and well. The joy that comes from our relationship with God heals us and gives us hope.

In the Gospel today we hear about the call of the apostles. Jesus calling Peter, Andrew, James, and John and the others to follow him. We hear that Jesus taught them as he went around all of Galilee proclaiming the Good News, the joy of the Gospel. What did the people see and hear as they followed Jesus. They heard about the good Samaritan who stopped and helped someone when no one else would, they learned about compassion and mercy when the father welcomed home the prodigal son, they saw Jesus heal the sick, people who couldn't even worship in the temple because of they were deemed unclean – labeled by the stigma of their illness, they saw Jesus welcome the stranger - people who looked and acted different than they did, and they saw Jesus bring joy to the outcast, the marginalized, the ones society didn't want around.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to follow Jesus. As Pope Francis has beautifully reminded us with his words and with his deeds that call means giving a priority to those in need.

By following Christ's call, we can make a difference for those individuals and families who are suffering alone and isolated by the stigma of their illness or the feeling they will be judged or misunderstood. For those who are overwhelmed by the crisis they face, our support and outreach can literally mean the difference between hope and despair. We can make a difference by listening without judgment, by caring without conditions, by walking with those who others won't, by bringing the light of Christ to the darkness of mental illness. Please pray for people with mental illness and their families. Pray for those who

minister to and with them, pray for those who provide needed mental health services, and please look for ways to answer Christ's call to make a difference.

### **OTHER EXCERPTS**

I often refer to mental illness as a “no casserole” disease. By that I mean when mental illness occurs in a family - no one comes to the door bringing casseroles. (EXAMPLE: Thirty years ago, my wife had open-heart surgery and while she was in the hospital and at home recovering, our doorbell never stopped ringing.) People were bringing casseroles for us to eat. I never realized how many ways there were to cook chicken. Twenty-five years ago, when my daughter was first hospitalized for mental illness, no one came to the door....Mental illnesses can be very isolating for the person and for the family.

Sadly, the stigma surrounding mental illnesses reinforces the old false stereotypes that keep people from seeking treatment and getting help or (as in our case) knowing where to get help. The stigma persists today despite what we now know --- that Mental illness is a disease of the brain, and is not due to poor parenting, not due to a weak character, or certainly not due to a lack of faith. Mental illness is a no fault disease. Like physical illnesses, It's not something you can just pull yourself out of. Just as you wouldn't tell someone who has cancer to “just get over it,” if you have depression or any major mental illness you need help for your illness.

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**Throughout the Gospels** Jesus teaches us about healing and restoring people to their rightful place in the community.

- He told us about the Samaritan who helped the man in the ditch when no one else would,
- He taught us compassion when the father welcomed home the prodigal son,
- He showed us justice when people who had an illness were deemed unclean and couldn't worship in the temple.... so Jesus went to them. Jesus taught us that everyone has dignity and everyone has value.