

“Be Doers of the Word”

Please note: This sermon discusses suicide prevention

What does it mean to be a Christian? What is our call as the Church? There are lots of ways to answer these questions and our text this morning from the letter of James gives us some ideas about how to live into our identities as followers of Jesus. James includes some really wonderful advice: be quick to listen and slow to speak, be slow to anger and get rid of things in your life that are sordid or immoral. Recognize that God’s Word, God’s truth is planted deep in your soul. I want to linger on these things for a second and allow us to ponder how each of these ideas might take root in our lives. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Be slow to anger. Rid our lives of dishonorable things. Truly know that God’s love and truth resides within us.

James doesn’t let us linger too long. He then says “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” “Be doers who act” he says for they will be blessed in their doing. What is the “doing” that we are called to be doing? James says “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” The Rev. Rachael Keefe paraphrases the text this way: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Creator, is this: to care for the vulnerable among us in their distress, and to keep oneself apart from the fears of the world.”¹

To care for the vulnerable among us sounds a lot like being doers of the word. You don’t have to look to far to find people who are vulnerable and in need of care. My heart this week has been focused on people who are contemplating suicide. News broke this past week about two people who died by suicide – a 9 year old boy in Denver and a pastor from California. These two individuals remind us that suicidal thoughts can afflict the youngest among us as well as those whom we might think are living a full and blessed life. Before we go any farther I want to say a few things about vocabulary. I will not be using the phrase “commit suicide.” This phrase is from a time when suicide was

¹ Rachael Keefe, “Responding to Suicide with Faith,” *Write Out of Left Field*, August 29, 2018, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://rachaelkeefe.wordpress.com/2018/08/29/responding-to-suicide-with-faith/>.

considered a criminal act and people who tried to kill themselves but survived were charged with a crime. The topic of suicide is already one laced with stigma and shame that often prevents people from seeking help. Instead, we are shifting to the phrase “died by suicide” or even turning suicide into a verb and saying that someone “suicided”.

In her book *The Lifesaving Church*, the Rev. Dr. Rachael Keefe tells her story of struggling with suicidal thoughts that began in her teen years. She describes her teen years as a period of “romancing death.” She writes “I didn’t necessarily want to die as much as I wanted the pain to end.”² Later in life she heard the term “psychache” and it changed the way she understood herself. Psychache is a term coined by Edwin Schneidman and describes intense, unbearable psychological pain that results from unmet psychological needs. Rachael adds that this concept of psychache speaks to the need to love and be loved and to belong somewhere with someone. Psychache feels insurmountable. If the unmet needs are not addressed, psychache will frequently lead to self-destruction including suicide.³ But the good news is the pain of psychache can be healed, and the church has the potential to play an important role in saving lives.

Rachael proposes that the only cure for psychache is unconditional love.⁴ This is where being doers of the word comes in. The church at its best the place where unconditional love is in abundance. The unconditional love of God is made tangible through our love for one another as human beings. We are called to be the embodiment of the unconditional love of Christ. This is not just some platitude that sounds nice on a Sunday morning, it is literally a matter of life and death. We need relationship to thrive as human beings, not just relationships with individuals but a sense of belonging somewhere. The church can be that place of belonging as long as we don’t let our fears and our traditions get in the way of creating a safe space for all. Jesus was notorious for breaking the rules of religious tradition and societal norms in order to bring healing to the most vulnerable. Rev. Keefe writes,

² Rachael Keefe, *The Lifesaving Church: Faith Communities and Suicide Prevention* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2018), 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

“In most of the miracle stories in the gospels, we focus on the healing of the individual. We are distracted by the fact that the formerly blind can see again, those unable to walk can walk again, lepers are cleansed, and the dead live again, and we miss the truly miraculous events: that Jesus re-membered those who were ritually unclean outcasts. He saw them and literally and metaphorically re-membered them: he rejoined them to their communities. If we want the church to be lifesaving, then this is our task: to see those who are on the margins of existence – a physically, emotionally, socially, or spiritually – and offer them a place of healing where they can be re-membered, rejoined to the Body of Christ. Prolonged isolation in body, mind, or spirit leads to death. Belonging to a community that truly welcomes everyone as they are and embodies Christ’s love without condition is the necessary antidote to deadly isolation.”⁵

I want to be clear that there are times when unconditional love is not enough to bring a person out of depression, anxiety, or other mental health concerns. Medication and/or therapy are often needed and are a valid part of treatment. As the church, we can destigmatize the use of medications and therapy but we can’t provide those treatments for people. So what are the tangible things we can do as a church and as individuals to help save lives? Let me share with you some of the wisdom from Rachael’s book:

- We can emphasize God’s unconditional love for all persons no matter what.
- We can accompany people in their suffering without trying to fix them.
- Be present. Simply showing up for people, even when it is uncomfortable.
- Remember that everyone is hurting in some way, and that anyone can experience shame, psychache, and emptiness and that our task as the church is to offer a place of welcome, inclusion, and acceptance.
- Practice being a nonjudgmental community grounded in God’s steadfast love, open to all who walk through the doors.

⁵ Ibid., 34–35.

- Learn to be more comfortable with those who struggle to give voice to their pain or painful experiences. Learn to listen without judgment. Validate their worth as human beings, and make room in the church for those of us who are less than perfect.
- Provide care and support for mental health crises just as we would a physical health crisis – offering support, meals, cards, and prayer.

One of the most important things to remember is that if you think someone might be contemplating suicide, ask them. It is a myth that asking someone if they are considering suicide will make them more likely to kill themselves. In fact, the opposite is true. Making it ok to talk about how they are feeling can bring healing and hope. We have to work toward removing the shame and stigma that leads people to isolate themselves and stay silent in their struggle with suicidality.

If you think someone is at risk for suicide, don't dismiss it. Talk about it. Call the suicide prevention hotline together. Call the Crisis Line at 828-HELP. You can also get help via text message by sending the text "MN" to the number 741741.

Together we are the body of Christ. When one of us is hurting, the body of Christ is hurting. When one of us is depressed, the body of Christ is depressed. When one of us is suicidal, the body of Christ is suicidal. But the body of Christ is also strong, full of love, and yearning to be whole. We are in this together and together we are called to put our love to work. To be doers of our faith. We have the unique ability to provide a no-strings-attached, loving community with the power to save lives - to embody the lifesaving love of Christ. Amen.