

Sermon One Night Imparts Knowledge to Another: A Discussion About Suicide
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 3.3.24

The suicide rate in the U.S. is climbing. It has risen by about 35 percent over two decades. This sharp rise is in contrast to the rest of the developed world where suicide is in decline. The rise of suicide is not uniform across all ages and backgrounds – young adults (15 to 25) and people over the age of 65 are the fastest growing groups. According to one report, white men ages 85 and older have the highest annual suicide rate of any group. There are many questions, and few answers, as to why there is a rise.

(When I talk about the various groups and their reasons, please know this is not addressing those in Hospice or those who are dealing with chronic pain; this is for those who are going through depression and hopelessness that we all feel from time to time)

Let's talk about young adults first. Before we do, I need to set a ground rule for talking about suicide: one must listen without judgement. This is the first, and hardest, rule. It is our natural tendency to want to jump in, reframe someone's thinking, and tell them things like this: they don't know what they are talking about, things aren't that bad, things could be worse, you personally have been through worse and you didn't want to commit suicide. Rule number one: don't do that! Listen, listen and listen without judgement. Hear what they are saying because it is such a blessing and honor that someone is actually expressing their feelings to you.

In my own reading, and aided with many studies sent to me by parishioners, I have read that young adults who experience thoughts of suicide feel as if their best life has passed them by; things will only get worse; they have missed out; they will not be able to achieve the level of financial status that their parents experienced; in other words, it's only going to get worse, so what's the point; there is no other reason to go on.

Studies indicate that adults over the age of 65 that have thoughts of suicide feel that their best life has passed them by; things will only get worse; they have contributed all that they can contribute; they feel useless and, at times, as a drain on others which is in contrast to how they used to be. In other words, it's only going to get worse, so what's the point; there is no other reason to go on.

If I could get these studies to talk to each other, or find common ground, it appears that both groups feel obsolete. And, it doesn't matter if you think the person telling you these things are true; one needs to listen without judgement.

In a perfect world, we'd get the older adults and the young adults to share their feelings and experience with each other and they'd feel better. But, studies also show that model doesn't work – people want to be heard by people of their own age and experience.

Society places value on things, on experiences, on people. I used to work deep within the insurance world, I know how valuation works. A claim for losing a left arm, in general, has less value than a claim for the loss of a right arm. A claim for a 25-year-old arm is more valued than that of a 75-year-old arm. Society, the courts, our own thoughts, all tend to place value. When someone feels obsolete, they feel as if their life; themselves; have no value. Since it is of no value, what's the purpose and point of living. Toss it out the way we'd toss something of no value out. That's how it works in this kingdom; but, how does it work in God's Kingdom? What value does God place on individuals, on you?

This is how God sees the value of each of you: you are entirely more precious than you can dream or imagine. God's value of you is inestimable. It far surpasses human understanding. Jesus said: Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? Birds don't produce yet God feeds them. In another Scripture passage, birds are commented on how beautiful God has made them, yet, they don't reap or sow, and yet God finds value in them. Imagine how much more your value is. We are created in God's image after all. Our value, your value, is inestimable.

Today's Gospel lesson is often depicted as the "mad Jesus" who drove the money changers out of the Temple. I don't think Jesus was mad. This wasn't a spur of the moment decision for him. You see, he had a rope and used it as whip to drive the people and animals out of his Father's House. Back in his day, he couldn't take his donkey to the nearest Ace Hardware and purchase a rope. Nope, back then, he'd have to make one. This is the only scripture reference I can find where Jesus employed the skills of a carpenter – which was Joseph's (his earthly dad's) occupation. Rope making was a carpenter's skill. In contrast, Jesus hung out with fishermen. They knew how to sew, how to repair boats and navigation – that's their skill set and frankly it's a good one to have for creating a religious movement. But for rope making, this is something he would have learned from Joseph. It is said that to get the raw materials to make a rope, to then get a loom and weave a rope, it would take three days. Interesting, three days...

You know, in my mind's eye, I see Jesus telling his disciples to go get the raw materials while he set out making a loom. They then watched him weave strands together and eventually make a rope. I imagine they were wondering to themselves what he was up to. And then, again, in my mind's eye, I see that six months has passed and it's time for the Passover. They are packing up their stuff for the journey uphill to Jerusalem and Jesus says, "Hey Bartholomew, grab my rope for me" and they were thinking *why in the world do we need a rope in Jerusalem?* But, when they got to the Temple they quickly discovered why he made it. So was he mad? No.

Angry, yes; but mad, no.

He was angry (probably) because the money changers were creating an obstacle to worship. Roman coins were not allowed in the Temple. They were exchanged for Temple currency so that travelers could then purchase an animal for sacrifice. I don't imagine it was a favorable exchange

rate. This made Jesus angry; enough to make a rope. He drove them out so that those heading to the Temple could do so without barriers.

What is the value of a Temple? Right now, there are worshippers gathered at the Western Wall of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. It is a symbol, a practice, a ritual, a sign of hope and presence of God among us. How about the Temple of All Angels? What is our value? For those gathered in person and those on line, this is a place of worship, of belonging, of ritual and a sign of hope and the presence of God among us. Have you ever been on a long road trip and saw, just above the tree line, a steeple with a cross at the top. You know that feeling; like you are no longer lost but that God is there. What is the value of a Temple?

Jesus said, "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will rebuild it," but he wasn't talking about the Temple in Jerusalem, he was talking about his body. The New Testament builds upon that theme and calls our bodies as Temples that house God. And, these temples have incredible value with God. So much so that he is willing to exchange the Second Person of the Trinity for them. Our value, the value of us as individuals, as temples – the value to God is incredible and without estimate. *For God so loved the world that he sent his only son.* This is the value of us individually and corporately.

Remember the number one rule: listen without judgement. It is the hardest thing to do. I have, on many occasions, listened to a young adult say that they feel that their life has no value, there is no point, their best life has passed by... and I want to take them by the shoulders and say, **THERE IS SO MUCH MORE IN LIFE FOR YOU.** ... but I can't because that'd break the first rule. I have had on many occasions listened to people over the age of 65 tell me that their best life has passed and they feel obsolete. I just want to take them by the hand and say, "But I love you. You have value."

David Brooks wrote about a family member who had a disease that made it so that he could no longer communicate. Brooks emphatically wrote that his loved one has value; just being in the room, listening to the stories, hearing from the grandkids even though he couldn't respond verbally; there is value, a tremendous value there. Just being a Temple, being a presence, a sign, a place of ritual and of history. There is value in the presence. And our bodies are temples. They are signs and history to someone else. And they have surpassing value to God.

The psalm we read for this morning has this phrase: One night imparts knowledge to another. Night, in an allegoric Hebrew sense, can be seen as depression. In other words, we can learn a lot from when we are down. The up times are good, we all enjoy them, but what do we learn? We learn from being down. From feeling worthless or valueless. One night imparts knowledge to another night. We learn from being down for the next time – the next night – we will remember, like going to a Temple, we will remember that we were down and that we got back up again. That is wisdom, that is the passing of knowledge. This is what those who have been down can help others by reminding them of their value.

If you feel down, go back to the image you had in your head of Jesus weaving a rope. See him weaving a rope to drive out dark nights and to pass on the knowledge of it from one night to another. If you are feeling down, remember your value is beyond human estimate. If you know someone who is down; listen without judgement, and, when the time is right, remind them of how you value them, of how one night imparts knowledge to another, and that their value in a Temple of God is beyond estimate in God's eyes.