

## A Few Thoughts for Mental Health Awareness Month

I Samuel 16:14-23; Acts 16:16-34

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

This happened last Sunday in North Carolina. The Self family—Roger, his wife, their son, and their daughter-in-law—went to church as usual. Afterwards they went to lunch at the Surf and Turf Lodge in Bessemer City. Roger Self, age 62, has been described as a pillar of his church and an icon of the community. His pastor said that the list is “a mile long” of people Roger has sacrificed to help. When the appetizers arrived, Roger stood and excused himself. Everyone assumed he was going to the restroom. A few minutes later he ploughed his SUV through the restaurant wall where his family was seated, killing his daughter and daughter-in-law. His wife and son were hospitalized in critical but stable condition.

Was he angry? No.

Was he upset about something? No.

Is he evil? No.

Roger Self is severely mentally ill. A couple of months ago he recognized the early stage of an oncoming depression. He had his son remove all the guns from his house. The family worked hard to get care for him. They never dreamed he would do what he did. On Monday their pastor said something that needs to be heard across this country:

*I pray that we as a society can finally get serious about mental health. I throw no stones, but at some point we have to be committed to end the debates and political posturing and finally get serious about this issue.* (Baptist News Global, May 21, 2018)

One in four people has a mental illness. Most of those people are not violent and will never hurt anyone. They are gentle souls who struggle. Some are paralyzed emotionally. Some are robbed of happiness. Some are unable to enjoy their children and others they love. Some are unable to

work. Go to your TED Talk app and search mental illness. Here are some of the titles you'll see:

- Depression, the secret we share
- Confessions of a depressed comic
- The voices in my head
- The bridge between suicide and life

And take the time to listen to some of those talks. Most of us are woefully uninformed about mental illness, which creates a fertile environment for stigma. That is why May is designated Mental Health Awareness Month. The purpose is to “fight stigma, provide support, educate the public and advocate for policies that support people with mental illness and their families.” (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

I know that mental illness, hallucinations, delusions, and paranoid schizophrenia are not the words you are accustomed to hearing from the pulpit. But these words are important and must not be banned from the pulpit and other public discourse. Today for my friends who struggle with mental illness and millions of others I want to share a few thoughts in recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month.

Some Bible scholars speculate that King Saul in the Old Testament was mentally ill. Of course, the people of that day had no understanding of mental illness, so they attributed his tormented behavior to an “evil spirit,” our text says. Their treatment was to have young David come and play his lyre, a harp-like musical instrument. The melodious sound of the lyre seemed to calm King Saul’s evil spirit. At least, for a while. You may remember that later Saul tried to murder David.

Then there is the child in our text from the book of Acts. She is described as a “slave girl who had a spirit of divination.” She followed Paul and his companions occasionally crying out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She did this for many days, Luke says, and finally Paul became annoyed. So one day Paul turned and said to this slave girl with the spirit of divination, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And this is what the text says, “And it came out that very hour.”

Now what are we to make of a story like this? To whom or what was Paul speaking? What was “it” that came out of this child? Many today speculate that this girl too may have been mentally ill. Today we have names for conditions like hers: paranoid schizophrenia, dissociative disorder, or perhaps delusional disorder. Of course, they had no understanding of these things then, so they called it by the names they understood: a spirit of divination or an evil spirit. Dr. William Willimon has written a helpful commentary on the book of Acts. This is what he says about this slave girl, “Here is a picture of enslavement—the grip of mental illness, schizophrenia, some ‘demon’ which holds the victim in bondage.” (*Interpretation* p., 138)

If you are familiar with mental illness, you will likely agree with Dr. Willimon’s word “enslavement.” Roger Self was a pillar of his church. An icon in the community. The picture of a model citizen. He was also a picture of enslavement. To mental illness.

So here we are in May of 2018, Mental Health Awareness Month, and we are reading ancient texts about evil spirits and demons. Do these stories contribute to the problem? Do they enforce the stigma? Sometimes they do. The Bible and the church both sometimes contribute to the problem. When clergy say that the mentally ill simply need to have more faith, they contribute to the problem. When the church tells people with mental illness, they need to read their Bible more or pray more, they contribute to the problem. So I want to offer these three suggestions.

First, we must allow the Bible be what the Bible was intended to be. The Bible is not a medical school textbook. It was never intended to be. Its purpose was never to explain psychiatric disorders nor any other medical disorder, and we must not try to force it to be what it is not. The Bible is a book of faith, a record of God’s interaction with men and women. The people of the Bible were doing the best they could to understand what they experienced. When they saw these unusual personality occurrences, they explained them with the language they had available to them. If we can honor that the Bible is a book of faith, that will allow us to banish old terminology and myths. It allows us to explain these unusual personality occurrences as mental illnesses that have a physical origin much like other physical illnesses. It allows us to be a part of removing the stigma and empowering people to get the treatment they need.

Here's my second suggestion: let us practice holistic ministry. Jesus did. Jesus was never concerned only with the spiritual side of people or only with the physical side or only the emotional side. Jesus was concerned with the whole person. So he helped people understand God and forgiveness and hope. He also fed the hungry and healed the sick and cast out those "evil spirits." He cared for the whole person.

The church must too. A study was done of people who sought help from their church for mental illness (*Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 2008). Thirty-two percent of those people were told that they didn't really have a mental illness. Their problem, they were told, was spiritual in nature. They needed to pray harder and read their Bible more. The study also found that people turned to their pastors first, not a psychologist. It's time for pastors and churches to quit saying that people with mental illness simply need to read their Bibles and pray more. It's time for us to quit saying that people need to stop taking their medicine and start depending more upon Jesus. We must quit being dismissive of mental illness and, like Jesus, show concern for the whole person.

And here's my last suggestion. Let's be champions of healthy religion. Mental illness is often tied up with sick religion. A man plucks out his eye because the Bible tells him he should. A girl cuts off her hand because that's what Jesus said. Someone cowers in fear because he has become obsessed with the book of Revelation and fears the coming of the great judgment. We must be champions of healthy, mature religion, which promotes freedom to think for one's self, individual responsibility, humility, self-reflection, service to others, and other qualities that build healthy, mature people.

One pastor said it on Monday. I'll say it again today. We must get serious about treating mental illness. This is not a political game. It is not a game of any kind because enslavement is not fun. I have listed two local resources for mental health in your bulletin: WellStone Behavioral Health and the local chapter of The National Alliance on Mental Illness. Your church and the Bible can be your partners in finding freedom and wholeness.

#### Closing Prayer

Blessed Lord, whose touch is gentle and empowering, come to each of us with what we need. Help us to find freedom and wholeness. Amen.