

Healing the Unseen
October 14, 2007 – Access Sunday
Guest Preacher – Sharlene K. Gugarty

Alex was born prematurely, but by the time she was a year old, she had caught up with all the developmental expectations of her parents. She was bright-eyed and curious about everything surrounding her. Alex's mother recalls how infectious Alex's laughter was and how delightful she was as a child. But when you talk about Alex as a teenager, her face clouds.

“It started with the nightmares,” she says, “and then there were the voices.” The voices that only Alex heard. The voices that told her to cut herself. To fear the neighbors. To run from home. To kill her mother.

For years, through residential placements and medications, through counseling and commitments, the voices continued to speak. Alex said they told her to color her hair pink and green. They told her to lie and steal. Finally, they told her to cheat at Monopoly when she played with her housemates at a group home in Hartford. Different voices told her housemates to punish Alex for cheating. To kill her for cheating. To stuff her battered body in a cardboard box. To put her out with the trash and go back to their honest Monopoly game.

Millions of people throughout the world hear the same voices. Not the still, small voice of conscience, but the voice of depression, anxiety, fear and disconnection. The gospel lesson for today speaks of Jesus healing people afflicted with leprosy. But Jesus has also heard the prayers of those afflicted with illness of the soul. The “disability” of the unseen illness.

The psalmist writes, “How long must I suffer anguish in my soul, grief in my heart, day after day?” (Psalm 13) “My heart throbs, my strength is spent, and the light has faded from my eyes. My friends and companions shun me in my sickness, and my kinfolk keep far off. Those who seek my life set their traps, those who mean to injure me threaten my destruction; they plot all day long.” (Psalm 38).

This Sunday is designated as “Access Sunday.” But when we consider the concept of accessibility, do we consider those with disabilities or diseases that we cannot see? Not usually. We think of our beautiful, accessible building with its ramp entrance and its elevator. Truly we are accessible to all. We offer hymnals in large print to those whose poor eyesight might keep them from singing. We have listening devices for those who might otherwise not be able to hear the word of God. We begin each worship hour by telling everyone that they are welcome here, no matter who they are or where they are on their faith journey.

Does that extend to the man whose mind is troubled? Do we include the woman whose addiction clouds her judgment and slurs her words? Do we include the dirty who cannot cleanse themselves, or even know that they should? What about those who live on the margins – their lives in shopping carts, their beds in the woods or perhaps a cardboard box?

And what of those among us who suffer in silence for fear of being mocked? Do you truly know your neighbor? There are people among us here who are haunted by private demons and fear the stigma that is attached to mental illness.

There is someone among us who was once so paralyzed by fear that she could not walk to the mailbox at the end of her driveway for more than three years. The world was too big and overwhelming. The neighbors all watched and reported about her. The trees had eyes. The squirrels gossiped about her. She drew her blinds and hid within the safety of her home.

There is someone among us who daily prays to silence the addictive voice that tells him that there is no harm in a sip of wine, a little white powder, a needle in his arm.

There is someone among us who, like the psalmist, prays nightly, “Be gracious to me, God, for I am trampled underfoot; assailants harass me all the day. All day long foes beset and oppress me, for numerous are those who assail me. In my day of fear I put my trust in your, the Most High, in God whose promise is my boast, in God I trust and shall not be afraid; what can mortals do to me?”

What, indeed, can mortals do to someone so disenfranchised, so ridiculed, so totally bereft of the companionship that might bring comfort to a tortured soul? Samuel Taylor Coleridge, addicted to opium, described the depth of despair in his poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. “So lonely (it) was that God himself scarce seemed there to be.”

Anton Chekov wrote, “People who lead a lonely existence always have something on their minds that they are eager to talk about.” We, as Christians, must strive to listen to those tortured voices. We must look past the illness. We must reach out.

Now, with the help of God and caregivers, people who suffer these ills are finding hope and healing. Now there is medication to replace the addictive drugs. There are people who will listen rather than shun. But there is much to do.

Pearl Bailey, special ambassador to the United Nations and noted jazz singer, shared her homespun wisdom on this subject. “Everybody wants to do something to help,” she said, “but nobody wants to be the first.”

Today, in celebration of all God’s children, we must be the first. The disciple Matthew, in his recounting of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, tells us that Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs.” If those among us who suffer from the terrors of mental illness are heirs to the kingdom of heaven, shouldn’t they be welcome in God’s house on earth? We have people who are here to celebrate God’s healing, like the Samaritan leper who recognized that the spiritual and social healing had more impact than the physical healing ever could.

As Pearl Bailey once observed, “People see God every day, they just don’t recognize Him.”