



SUICIDE, HOPE, AND LOVE

REFLECTIONS ON POSSIBILITIES
WITHIN THE FAITH COMMUNITIES

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Suicide, Hope and Love

“Do not harm yourself. We are all here.”

Acts 16:28

Every day about 17,000,000 members of our society need to hear the words that Paul spoke to a Philippian jailor who was about to kill himself. This is the average number of persons in the United States who are thinking about killing themselves on any given day. The numbers for high school students are more arresting: 20% of high school students indicate that they have considered suicide in the past 12 months. This means that, on average, 30 members of a 500-congregation and 20 members of a 50-member youth group are considering or have recently considered suicide.

The faith community is strangely silent on this issue. At meetings with religious leaders I put it like this:

Suppose you were to hear that someone was thinking about killing 30 of your adult members and 10 members of your youth group. You would pray, sound warnings, call police, take protective measures, and pray some more. But because the potential killer is the member herself, nothing is done.

Whenever the issue of suicide is raised, the knee jerk reaction is to provide people with a list of signs indicating that someone may be thinking about suicide. However, when we gather folks together in a group and explore with them why they are not taking action to deal with the problem of suicide, the issue is almost never about inadequate information. The issues that block life-saving action are primarily emotional and the list of those obstacles in faith communities is even more daunting than in secular organizations.

There is every indication that most suicides are preventable. However, prevention requires two things: People who are thinking about suicide must feel safe telling others and people who suspect that someone else is thinking about suicide must feel comfortable asking them about it. Why can't we do this? Here is a common list of what people say are the obstacles.

- Shame – People are ashamed that they are thinking about suicide.
- Guilt – People who have someone in their family who is considering suicide or who has completed suicide feel guilty that they may have caused the suicidal thinking.
- Frustration – People who are thinking about suicide have generally tried to tell others a number of times about their struggle but are frustrated to discover that *no one will listen*.
- Fear – People are afraid that asking someone about suicide may put the idea into their heads.



- Inadequacy – People are reluctant to ask others if they are thinking about suicide because they are afraid that if the person says “yes” they won’t know what to do or may end up bearing a responsibility for the person at risk that they are not prepared to handle.
- Faith conflicts – People who are thinking about suicide feel conflicted because they believe their thinking indicates a lack of faith.
- Hopelessness – People believe that someone thinking about suicide can’t be stopped and that, sooner or later, they will find a way to take their life no matter what we do.

Because the obstacles to saving lives from suicide are primarily emotional and spiritual, the faith community is ideally positioned to address this issue. It does not require capital expansion, new sound systems, or changes in worship format. What it requires is conversion: a basic emotional/spiritual reorientation of the community. There are some theological underpinnings to this process and some practical steps that can be taken as well. But why should a congregation and its leaders invest in this process? Here are some reasons:

- Suicide is the third leading killer of high school students and the second leading killer of young adults. It kills more of our young people than all the infectious diseases combined.
- More people die from suicide on the planet than all the wars. In the United States, we would have to crash jet airliners into twin towers every month for a year and we still would not equal the number of deaths from suicide.
- For every person who dies by suicide, 100 persons are injured in a suicide attempt. 10% of high school students indicate that they have self-injured with suicide in mind. More people are injured in suicide attempts than in all the automobile accidents. The majority of these injuries are hidden and many go untreated or are self-treated.
- Research shows that 80% of all adults will seriously consider suicide at some point in their lives.
- Older adult males are at particular risk of suicide with a suicide rate 5 times that of the general population. This is important in many congregations that have older memberships.
- While faith community involvement is a mild protective factor, faith community doctrinal systems are not. Research discloses no differences in suicide rates among liberal, fundamental, charismatic, Catholic, Protestant or other faith communities.

Suicide represents a unique opportunity for faith communities to articulate what is necessary for life, namely, hope and social connection. Theologically, faith communities have tended to articulate hope as an eschatological reality. The placement of hope only in eternity constitutes a problem for our thinking about suicide. If hope only lies on the other side of death then the suicidal impulse is reinforced. The failure of the faith community to speak of hope as a current temporal reality as well as a final destination strengthens suicide as a legitimate option.

Hope cannot be commanded by fiat. It must be grown like a crystal of renewed thinking. Theologies of hope that focus on the process of living and the positive, meaningful contribution of that living into eternity hold the most promise. If lessons learned, experiences garnered, and love offered are durable across the horizon of time and eternity, this becomes a basis for hope. The further recognition that God is always working creatively with the real elements of life to form a next best plan gives a dynamic quality to spirituality that is vastly superior to a static understanding that leads to a constant sense of failure and recitation of lost opportunities. Since people who are close to suicide often have very low energy levels, hope must be grounded in the capacity of God to take relatively small steps, made in faith, and multiply their impact through the working of grace. For those thinking about suicide, hope must be generated out of the mustard seed.

The fact that hope in this life is always alloyed with pain creates ambivalence. The concept of ambivalence is critical to the intervention process. People who are thinking about suicide are rarely fully convinced that death is the right option. They have forces pulling them in the direction of death and other forces pulling them in the direction of life. Helping people discover this ambivalence is a step forward. In other words, the simple recognition in a suicidal person that they are feeling torn about their decision is positive. Knowing that God has set before them life and death, and that they are feeling pulled in both directions is better than feeling that everything is headed toward suicide. A present hope, constructed out of the real working of the Holy Spirit with the actual elements of a life situation is critical to helping a person who is thinking about suicide.

The second theological concept that suicide requires us to articulate is that of the community of faith. It is an accepted fact that the risk of suicide increases dramatically when a person is socially isolated. Here the faith community must take a hard look at itself and its de facto practice of faith community discipline. While the formal discipline of faith community members is largely a thing of the past, a more informal process is often at work. Many faith communities no longer practice ex communication and those that do are loose in its formal application. However the enforcement of solitude upon impenitent souls has a significant history in spiritual communities. Penitentiaries were originally designed for just this purpose.

When members disappoint the community the reaction is often one of forced solitude. This is expressed by outright exclusion, removal from group rosters, avoidance, passive responses to absence, termination of contact, refusal to return phone calls or moving down the ladder of communication (e.g. from face-to-face conversations to phone calls,

from phone calls to letters, from letters to emails, from emails to silence). This de facto faith community discipline is extremely powerful. But it is also unarticulated and therefore unregulated. Because it is not named, it can easily be denied. This adds an element of “crazy making” to it. The person experiences the force of the isolation and at the same time is made to believe that the isolation is not really happening.

What faith community need to realize is that these isolating behaviors are “kill signals” for those who are considering suicide. The fact that this is unintentional does not make it any less lethal. It is critically important for faith community to realize that isolation of members is not a desirable form of faith community discipline. At its worst it is a form of psychic battering. It removes a critical resource from persons at the very moment of crisis when new growth is possible. We know, for example, that divorced persons have a suicide rate that is six times higher than those who are married or partnered. This tendency is aggravated when the faith community isolates the divorced as an act of informal faith community discipline.

In strategic planning much is made of a vision statement that articulates a future state toward which the faith community is stretching. The best vision statements evoke a mental image or snapshot. Taking the threat of suicide seriously would suggest that vision statements might center on hope and social connection. A faith community wishing to inoculate its members against suicide and self-injury could envision what it would look like to be a community where no one loses hope and no one is alone.

If we return to the opening Scripture and reflect upon Paul’s interaction with the Philippian jailor that averted his self injury, we are guided in several helpful directions.

1. We must see the person at risk. Paul did. Was he standing in front of Paul in plain view? Did Paul surmise that the man might be in trouble and seek him out? Both possibilities are before us in congregations. A few people are in plain view. They let us know clearly and directly that they are thinking about suicide. Unfortunately the number of people who have the capacity to do this is relatively small. People who are thinking about suicide are generally depressed; their energy level is low; it is difficult for them to broach a subject that most people are uncomfortable talking about.

This means that the community must bear the burden of raising the subject. Sermons should address the issue of suicide and suicidal thinking as a significant human need. Corporate prayers should recognize that a significant number of persons in a congregation are generally thinking about suicide and need the gift of hope and love. In addition members should be equipped to become comfortable asking people if they are thinking about suicide. They need help getting past the myths about suicide, namely, that asking about suicide would put it in someone’s head.

Given the prevalence of suicidal thinking in a typical congregation and given the fact that it will be an issue over the life span of nearly everyone, it makes

sense that it be addressed sacramentally. If we circumscribe marriage, ordination, confirmation, and baptism with vows, doesn't it make sense that we call members to take a vow that they will disclose suicidal thinking when it occurs in their lives *especially since life and death are on the line*? This is a vow that could be remembered and recalled at critical junctures...death of a spouse, retirement, divorce, loss of employment, entering high school, going off to college.

2. We must be clear about our role. "Do not harm yourself." Faith community members are not being called to become amateur therapists. We are seeking to stop suicidal *behavior*. It is unrealistic for members to think that they can stop a person from thinking about suicide. Suicidal thinking generally develops over a long period of time and requires a significant reworking of mental and emotional processes. Suicidal behavioral, on the other hand, can often be prevented through the call of a persistent and loving voice. This saving act is possible for anyone and appropriate to a body that lays claim to the priesthood of all believers.
3. We must claim the power of a present community. Over time, suicidal thinking wears down the inner resources of the soul. When faith, hope, meaning, purpose, and confidence, are depleted it takes time for their replenishment. Community, on the other hand, can be restored relatively quickly if people are willing to be present to the person at risk. This is the critical resource as Paul notes: "Do not harm yourself. *We are all here.*" Notice that a de facto faith community discipline of isolation works exactly counter to this verse. At the very moment that a present community holds the potential to protect a life from injury or death, the community withdraws.

At its best, a ministry of suicide prevention is actually a ministry of life preservation. Spiritual resilience is the ability of a soul to "bounce back" from adversity because forethought has been given to the resources needed to face adversity. Resources that are needed to make hardy souls include strong relationships, sources of meaning and hope, service to others, solid financial resources, vocational integrity, etc. The issue is one of readiness. One source of theological reflection along these lines is the call to readiness found in the doctrine of the second coming of Christ. This is not merely a call to be ready to die. It is a call to be ready to face the adversity that accrues to moments of crisis. It is not developed from a somber preoccupation with future tribulation, but from a wise investment in the things that sustain the abundant life that God promised us.



A Covenant of Life

(The following liturgy was developed from a Christian perspective. The author does not presume to be adequately equipped to develop similar liturgies for other faith traditions, but invites other into that work.)

Scripture Readings

The religious leader, Priest, or lay leader will read one or more of the following Scriptures

Ps 139:1-13

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in-- behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

(NIV)

Luke 15:3-6

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

(NIV)

1 Cor 12:20-26

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are presentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

(NIV)

Acts 16:25-28

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

(NIV)

Witness

A person who has lived through a season of suicidal thinking may be asked to share his/her experience, strength, and hope as a witness to the redemptive power of God and the love of God's people.

Introduction to the Promises

The religious leader, Priest, or lay leader will say

Friends in faith, the God who has woven light and matter into a living tapestry has bestowed upon each of us the gift of life. This gift is inwardly sustained by the renewal of the mind and the heart through the working of the Spirit and strengthened by the proclamation, sacraments, and fellowship of the community of faith.

The testimony of human experience is that many of our number will pass through a season of suicidal thinking on their life's journey. This impulse, whether tragically enacted or secretly rehearsed threatens every other sacred promise including the promises of baptism, marriage, ordination, and faith community membership. For this reason, the Covenant of Life is the foundation of every other promise.

When the shadows of despair and isolation fall across our lives and render us vulnerable to self-destruction, the Spirit stirs in us the hope of new beginnings and moves the faith community to assert the vigor of its love, the preciousness of life, and the power of the Good News to call God's children out of darkness and into his marvelous light. God calls those who have been redeemed from a season of suicidal thinking to courageously share their experience, their strength, and their hope, empowered by a love that casts out fear.

Since God desires life for us, but also makes us custodians of one another, let us enter into a sacred covenant of life sealed by these promises:

The Promises

Do you affirm your life as a gift from God, created through the mystery of God's working, redeemed by grace, and sustained by the Spirit?

We do.



Will you preserve and protect your life by a gentle watchfulness over your own thinking, and will you seek the support of wise counsel when tempted to disregard the gift of your life?

With God's help, we will.

Do we, as a community of faith, open our minds and hearts to receive God's love anew and to an awakening of the courage to lovingly engage those who show signs of slipping into the night of suicidal thinking?

With God's help, we do.

Will you offer light to those dwelling in the night of suicidal thinking, and, if appropriate, will you share your experience, your strength, and your hope without guilt crippling your love or shame withering your touch?

With God's help, we will.

The Peace

The peace of the Lord be with you!

And also with you!

Members may offer to one another a sign of God's peace.

Renewal of Baptism

Scripture Readings

The Religious leader, Priest, or lay leader will read one or more Scriptures (see above).

Preface

The Religious leader, Priest, or lay leader will say

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The testimony of human experience is that many of our number will pass through a season of suicidal thinking in their life's journey. This impulse, whether tragically enacted or secretly rehearsed threatens every other sacred promise including the promises of baptism, marriage, ordination, and faith community membership. For this reason, the Covenant of Life is the foundation of every other promise.

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God has called _____ out of the night of suicidal thinking and into a second day of joyful companionship and faithful service to God. By the renewal of Baptism he/she recalls the meaning and power of that Baptism, passes through the waters of death, and rises to a new life in Christ.

Prayer over the Water

Bless, O Lord, this water, that in the sound of its pouring we might remember our Baptism, experience the awakening splash of your love, and trust the renewing power of your Spirit to transform deserts into gardens. By this renewal of Baptism, forgive our sins, cleanse our wounds, and quench the deep thirst of our souls. Amen.

Vows for the Individual

Do you renounce evil and its power in the world which defies God's righteousness and love?

I do.



Do you renounce the deceptions of the darkness that deny the gift of your life, isolate you from the community that loves you, and exiles you in hopelessness?

I do.

Do you turn to God and trust him for your deliverance?

I do.

Will you nourish the life of the Spirit within you by tending to your soul, engaging in study, communing with God through spiritual practice, and by continuing in fellowship with friends within and beyond the household of God?

I will.

Will you preserve and protect your life by a gentle watchfulness over your own thinking, and will you seek the support of wise counsel when tempted to disregard the gift of your life?

With God's help, I will.

Will you offer light to those dwelling in the night of suicidal thinking, and, if appropriate, will you share your experience, your strength, and your hope without guilt crippling your love or shame withering your touch?

With God's help, I will.

Vows for the Congregation

Do we renounce our tendencies to fear and avoid those gripped by the night of suicidal thinking which deepens their isolation and dims the light of hope?

We do.

Do we turn to God and trust him for deliverance?

We do.

Do we open our minds and hearts to receive his love anew and to an awakening of courage to lovingly engage those who show signs of slipping into the night?

We do.

Do we extend our fellowship to _____, boldly affirm the gift of his/her life, and promise to surround him/her with prayer?

We do.

Lighting of a Candle

As a candle is lit, the Religious leader, Priest, or lay leader will say

Isa 9:2

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.

(NIV)

Anointing with Oil

Prayer

A prayer shall be said with the laying on of hands.

Now may the goodness of God that gave you birth, the Good News of God's love that has claimed you anew, and the healing power of the Holy Spirit abide with you, now and always. Amen.

Greeting

Welcome to your Second Day!

For a resource on how to handle funeral and memorial services for those who have died by suicide, see

After a Suicide: Recommendations for Religious Services and Other Public Memorial Services.

<http://www.sprc.org/library/aftersuicide.pdf>