**Holy Transformation (Mental Health Sunday) May 1st, 2022.**

I want to share with you a story of someone who was a teacher. They taught at a really tough low-income neighbourhood where there were a lot of drugs and violence. Even the police in the neighborhood only went out in pairs.

The school had a reputation of being a difficult school, with a high drop out rate, but this teacher chose to go there because she felt she could make a difference in some of the students lives.

She remembers that one day a fight broke out in her classroom because one student had said something about another student’s mother. As fists were flying, she tried to separate the two students, holding one of them back, while the other ran for safety, but she was left holding their coat as the student wriggled out of it – they then spun around to face her, and she could see that they had a sharp pair of scissors, aimed at her as a weapon.

Luckily, their grievance was not with her, so she managed to talk them into dropping the scissors and was not hurt that day.

She was not so lucky a few weeks later when walking up the stairs during lunchtime duty, she told a group of boys heading towards her that they needed to get outside. They deliberately kept walking in wall towards her, and they pushed her backwards, and she fell tumbling down the stairs.

She was traumatized and resigned from teaching the next week.

Several years later, she found herself teaching again, and once again was with a particularly difficult and unruly class. They ignored her requests to follow the rule to hand over their phones during class, and when she tried to take it from them, they made false accusations that she had physically grabbed a student. Enforcing their student rights, an investigation ensued, and the teacher once again found herself traumatized.

The event triggered the unconscious memory of the trauma from years ago, and it evoked a case of situationally induced anxiety disorder. It is a kind of post traumatic stress disorder. The teacher was unable to sleep at night; although she had years of successful teaching, she felt she could no longer make decisions; she lost her appetite; she cried for seemingly no reasons; she could not make cohesive thoughts; she became listless – there were a long list of symptoms. She was unable to return to work.

Thankfully, this teacher was able to get support from her Dr.

He helped her understand that the condition that she was experiencing, was not just something that she could ‘snap out of.’

It was a chemical disorder in the brain. It was a mental illness – and like any other illness, it required treatment.

And, through her treatment of therapy, meditation, physical exercise, diet, all coupled with prescribed medication – she was able to transform her life. In fact, she went onto become a Minister!

Yes, this is my story – it is not one I share often, because even today society has strong stigmas attached to mental illness. I know that because of my experience. People would look at me and wonder “what’s wrong with you – you look ok.” People would expect me to just ‘snap out of it.’

Or worse, people would just avoid me because they didn’t know what to say.

Mental illness remains one of the most stigmatized disorders in North American society.

Stigma refers to those negative attitudes and beliefs that arouse fear, rejection, avoidance, and discrimination against individuals with mental illness.

And because of this stigma, individuals with mental illness may internalize those negative attitudes and beliefs, so much so that they may conceal symptoms and fail to seek treatment.

We all know that mental illness has drastically increased.

The isolation and the anxiety of living through a pandemic, has paid a toll on everyone’s mental wellbeing.

Depression, Loneliness, Anxiety, Stress …. These are mental and psychological disorders that effect our well being. And they are probably symptoms that all of you have faced at some time over the last two years.

Statistic Canada released a survey in September of last year that examined the increase in mental health disorders over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. It indicated that one in four (25%) of all Canadians aged 18 and older, screened positive for symptoms of depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress disorder.

And among the 18- 24 age group, 83% had experienced at least one of these negative mental health impacts. That’s a staggeringly high percentage!

COVID 19 has not just been a viral pandemic – it has been a pandemic of mental health illness.

But my hope is, that since it has come to the forefront of our awareness, then we will be able to remove the stigma’s attached to it, and we can talk about it in the open.

I am encouraged to see that there is an increase in funding and facilities available. The federal organization, Mental Health Commission of Canada, has developed a national mental health strategy, offering support, and programs.

You can find mental health services in your community through eMental Health.

But, what can we do as a community of faith?

What are we called to do as people of faith?

As we talk about breaking down stigma, we remind ourselves of what Jesus said to the disciples, *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you… By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:34-35)

Jesus is speaking of unconditional love – but there is work to do if we are to love in this way.

Breaking down stigma related to mental health is not simple.

It requires a great deal of love to understand another’s journey.

It requires us to be willing to sit down and have non-judgemental conversations.

It requires us to be open to listening to each other.

When you are struggling with a mental health disorder, then knowing that you can openly talk to someone is very healing – I know that firsthand!

In the newsletter this week I put ‘5 Simple Things You Can Do’ to make the world a better place for people with mental health challenges and their families:

1. Be a friend. 2. Share your story.

3. Watch your language. 4. Be a “StigmaBuster.”

5. Learn the facts.

And what can we each do for ourselves, when we find that we are personally struggling with mental health?

Spirituality is an essential part of a holistic approach to mental health and wellness. As the writer of Revelations says:

*“God is the Alpha and the Omega, God is with us in the beginning and in the end,”* (Revelations 22:13)

This is a promise that we can claim.

No matter who we are, or what our mental health diagnosis is, or where we are on life’s journey.

We know that God promises to be our God.

New brain science research confirms what our ancestors always knew: God’s love has healing power for our emotional, social, and mental wellbeing.

Faith in God can assure us of two protective factors:

(1) you are not alone and (2) you are loved.

Our scripture reading today from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians speaks to finding our confidence and inner strength in God.

It begins … *“God wants us strong”.* God wants us to be able to “*stand up to anything that is thrown our way.*” And so, God provides us with the tools that we will need. The ‘armour’ of God.

As Paul was writing to the early church, he knew that they would have difficult days ahead of them. They were seeking leadership to move them forward as a community of believers; they were stressed and anxious; and later in the letter we hear that there was division among them.

Perhaps there are some similarities with the community of faith at Grace?

I am certain that Paul had concerns for the mental wellbeing of the Ephesians.

And so, he tells them to use the armour that God gives them so that they can stand firm: truth, righteousness, peace, and faith.

He reminds them to stay grounded in God’s word, and he reminds them of the importance of prayer.

He writes: “*Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other’s spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.”*

When we are grounded in the armor of God, both as individuals, and as a community of faith, then we are truly able to stand stronger, and face whatever curve ball life throws us.

We are able to transform a difficult situation into one of growth.

I know that personally, because of my own past experience with mental health disorder.

Facing my struggles head on with God’s help, made me stronger, more compassionate, and gave me a deeper understanding towards anyone else with mental health wellness concerns.

I am sure each of you have faced anxiety and stress to some degree, especially during Covid.

And perhaps as a community of faith you are experiencing that now with an uncertain road ahead.

So, I invite you now to close your eyes, and to take a moment to imagine yourself with the armour of God.

Imagine it not as heavy objects, but as metaphorical gifts that will give you all that is needed.

Gifts that will give you the assurance of being embraced by the Divine.

See yourself embraced and defended with the metaphorical armor of faith.

See yourself given the strength to find your own inner resources of confidence, and giftedness.

See this community of faith given the assurance to move forward with hope and trust, rooted in God.

And when you can imagine all that, allow yourself to be transformed by the Spirit.

Allow God’s Spirit to move through this community of faith.

Allow God’s Spirit to move through you as individuals, empowering you to release your anxieties, to let go of your stress, and to renew your mental well being.

Breathe in the God’s Spirit.

Listen to the Spirit to show you a way.

And be ready to move forward, and to celebrate Holy Transformation. Amen.