

## **What Would Jesus Say About Mental Health?**

**Matthew 14:22-32**

**July 11, 2021**

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In the past year, not only have we experienced an unprecedented pandemic that touched nearly every aspect of our lives, but in the midst of this health crisis other issues either became part of our collective consciousness or they already existed but intensified. How can people of faith speak into these issues with healing and hope. Faith is not something that we compartmentalize and turn to only when we need it, but faith ought to be the foundation that will impact everything else that we experience. So, this month, we will consider four issues – last week we looked at how divided we are as a nation and how faith calls us to embrace values that are neither red nor blue and if we will get close enough to each other and truly listen we can hear the voice of Jesus calling us to common ground.

Today, I want to focus on mental health. Roughly 80% of Americans will have struggled with some form of mental illness at some point in their lives. This is almost all of us. We will face deep depression, anxiety issues, bipolar issues. This is us. 19% of us will struggle with anxiety in any given year. This is not simply worry but deep anxiety that affects your life. 7% will struggle with depression. 4% will struggle with PTSD. 3% will struggle with bipolar. That's in a normal year, but as we know, the past year has not been a normal year. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 4 in 10 adults in the US have reported symptoms of anxiety and depression. That's almost four times the pre-pandemic number, and among young adults that number is 56%. Suicide rates already on the rise before the pandemic – in the past year 1 in 4 young adults have had serious thoughts of suicide. Many researchers believe what is being identified is only the tip of the iceberg as routine care was disrupted during the pandemic. This is us.

Covid 19 has been a mental health crisis in addition to being a physical health crisis. Many of us know the stress of the past year, or the isolation from family and friends, or the loss of employment. Families have been forced to be at home and part of that has been good, but it has also accentuated already existing conflicts. And for many, trying to maintain their jobs while working from home and at the same time assisting children in online learning has been overwhelming. I've never had trouble sleeping through the night until the past year – and suddenly I was waking up concerned for this church, our staff, and all of you. The stress of the past year has been huge. Of course, it would impact our mental health. And if you are right now walking through any of this, you are not alone. And in fact, your church ought to be the place where you hear about this.

One reason I wanted to devote today's message to mental health is that it is important to be able to talk about mental health to de-stigmatize it. Something happens when we shine a light on those things that are hidden. When we acknowledge what is and invite others to come alongside us and seek the resources to help. Thursday afternoon, I spoke to fifty people who came here for our Grief Coalition. Each person had experienced a significant loss, the death of a loved one and I thanked them for coming, because just being in the room was the first step toward healing and wholeness. Acknowledging something is not right. We are willing to talk about physical health. I get a tooth ache and what do I do? I go to the dentist, and there's no shame in going to the dentist. Your brain is the most powerful organ in your body. A thousand laptop computers do not have the storage capacity of your brain. And it determines everything in your body. And like my computer, sometimes there is a glitch – and I try to fix it and when that doesn't work, I restart the computer, but often even that doesn't work so I call Tony – he's IT.

And when there's a problem with my brain or my emotions or I feel stuck – it might be time to call someone who can help. Talking about what's going on inside is the first step to a better life.

A year ago, I went to Mayo Clinic for a physical. No issues, it had been a few years and my insurance would pay for it, so I went. And after all the tests were done, the doctor sat with me and said, everything looks okay. You are healthy. You would be even healthier if you lost some weight and exercised more – and then he prescribed a statin, not because I have a heart problem but just precautionary because he said, the one thing I can't change is my age. So, everyday I take a statin, and I'm not ashamed to tell you that. There have also been times in my life when I sought help from a therapist because what I was trying wasn't working – and talking made all the difference.

Last week, I came across this article in *Psychology Today*, Robert Whitley says this: **The amassed research indicates that higher levels of religious belief and practice (known in social science as "religiosity") is associated with better mental health. In particular, the research suggests that higher levels of religiosity are associated with lower rates of depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, and suicidal behavior. Religiosity is also associated with better physical health and subjective well-being.** (Robert Whitley, PhD. *Psychology Today*) And I would agree as long as you are in a church that is healthy and focused on the gospel message of God's love, grace, and forgiveness.

So, what would Jesus say about mental health? First of all, mental health disorders are not new. Humans have struggled with this throughout history, but they didn't have names for what they experienced. People in biblical times knew PTSD. People in biblical times knew depression. People in biblical times knew anxiety and thoughts of self-harm. Moses and Elijah prayed to God to die. Life had become so overwhelming for them that they said I don't want to live anymore, but they didn't give up – and God strengthened them. When we turn to the book of Psalms, we see the full range of human experience. There are mountaintop experiences of great joy, but there are also the valleys when the writer feels abandoned and cries out: Where are you God. Psalm 42:3 – **My tears have been my food both day and night as people constantly questioned me, "Where is your God now?"** or Psalm 22:1 when we hear Jesus cry out from the cross: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."** Or in the book of Job when the bottom falls out of Job's life and even his closest friends ridicule him and his wife suggests he just curse God and die. Throughout the Bible we find persons who struggled but they hung on with faith and God did not let go. Jesus spent his life with hurting people. This is what Jesus came to do.

Today's scripture comes from the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel. As the chapter begins, we learn that John the Baptist has been executed. Remember, it was John who baptized Jesus – John who was probably his cousin – John who had the courage to speak out against the actions of Herod – and now had paid for his convictions with his life. And when the news reaches Jesus, he tries to get away from the crowd that is following him. He needs some alone time. So, he gets into a boat to find a deserted place, but the crowd can see the boat and they follow him. Jesus is unable to get away from the needs of the people who desperately need what he has to offer. But when evening comes, the crowd is hungry – and the disciples want to send the people away because they don't have food for the crowd, but miraculously, Jesus is able to feed a crowd of thousands with just five loaves of bread and two fish. And in that experience, the disciples witness the power of faith, but it isn't clear that they understand what they've just witnessed. So, Jesus sends his disciples in a boat on the Sea of Galilee – and Jesus is not with them. And a storm comes up. They knew the Sea of Galilee. They know the power of the storm and it's dark and they know this is it – they are going to die. But then Jesus comes toward them,

walking on the water, but they don't know it is Jesus – it's dark; it's the middle of a storm – **They were terrified, and said, "It's a ghost!" They were so frightened, they screamed.** They had heard about sea monsters and ghosts. They are going to die! But what they thought was a ghost turns out to be Jesus who says **"Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid.** When you are in the middle of a storm in your life mentally, physically, psychologically, economically, relationally, look around – Jesus comes. The disciple Peter got out of the boat and began walking to Jesus – and as long as his focus was on Jesus, he was fine, but when he focused on the wind and the waves he began to sink.

We see this moment in a scene from the movie *The Shack*, based on the book by the same title. It is the story of a father named Mack who suffers an unimaginable loss. One weekend, Mack takes his three children camping. His two older children are out on the lake in a canoe when his daughter stands up to wave at him, and the canoe capsizes. The strap of his son's life preserver gets caught on the canoe, pulling him underwater. He's drowning. Seeing what's happening, Mack jumps in the water, swims out to release his son, and pulls him to shore where he resuscitates him. But while this is happening, someone comes along who happens to be a serial killer of young children and takes his younger daughter, Missy. The story follows Mack through this dark place in his life where he struggles with guilt and grief and deep depression. His journey takes him to the Shack where his daughter was murdered, and he is forced to face the darkness inside. And it's there that he experiences the presence of Christ. Here's that scene **[video]** His is the story of Peter and the disciples and so many of us who have struggled. Keep your eyes focused on Jesus. Jesus wants to walk beside you, and when he is walking with you and you know that he is walking with you, there is hope.

In story after story, we find that Jesus had compassion for people who were broken and suffering. Jesus could touch or pray, and persons were made well. And though Jesus can work through our prayers, that's not the only way Jesus works. He also works through medication and talk therapy and people who care and come alongside. He uses you.

For the past year and a half, the hallway outside my office door has been filled with tables that have become a food shelf for families in our child care center who experience food insecurity. How does the food get there? Each night, God doesn't miraculously send food from heaven and fill the tables. You do that. God works through you to provide the funds and shop for the food and keep the tables filled with food and listen for the needs of those without enough food to feed their children. And the families are led into that hallway and miraculously (that's their word – not mine) they receive what they did not have. How does Jesus work? He uses you. When people have mental health needs, he uses you. Jesus works through you as you come alongside and walk with each other – and reach out to the resources that bring healing and hope.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 11, 2021**

**Weekly Prayer:** God of mercy and grace, touch and heal our brokenness and lift us out of pain and despair. Dry the tears of our hurts. Comfort and nourish us with the many blessings of your powerful love. Let us also be your instruments of healing to people and to a world that is hurting. In your name, we pray. Amen.

### **Monday, July 12**

#### **Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-3; Psalm 147:1-5**

The LORD God's spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and

liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion's mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, planted by the LORD to glorify himself.

Praise the LORD! Because it is good to sing praise to our God! Because it is a pleasure to make beautiful praise! The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem, gathering up Israel's exiles. God heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds. God counts the stars by number, giving each one a name. Our Lord is great and so strong! God's knowledge can't be grasped!

**Observation:** Broken hearts may not be a precise clinical term, but it nevertheless underlies many of the mental health challenges we see. When something or someone breaks your heart (in any way), the pain's intensity can convince you that healing will forever elude you. The prophet Isaiah wrote of a promised Messiah whose mission was to bring good news, including "to bind up the brokenhearted." Jesus said that passage defined his mission (Luke 4:16-21). Psalm 147 knew God doesn't tell us to ignore our pain. Hearts break, but God does promise to heal the brokenhearted.

**Application:** Psalm 147:3 offered a word picture of God as a caring healer, perhaps a devoted parent, tenderly bandaging the wounds life inflicts on all of us. A bandaged physical wound sometimes leaves a scar, and so does a broken heart. When has God given you healing, either directly or through one or more of God's faithful human servants? How has God enabled you to go on with life despite whatever scars your spirit bears?

**Prayer:** Healing God, when my heart breaks, you extend comfort and healing. As I meet others whose hearts are breaking, give me the courage and caring to offer them your healing. Amen.

**Tuesday, July 13**

**Scripture: Matthew 26:36-38; Hebrews 4:14-16**

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. He said to the disciples, "Stay here while I go and pray over there." When he took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, he began to feel sad and anxious. Then he said to them, "I'm very sad. It's as if I'm dying. Stay here and keep alert with me."

Also, let's hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God's Son; because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin. Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

**Observation:** When you are hurting, it's easy to think "no one understands how I feel." We often extend that thought to God. How could the all-powerful ruler of the universe have any clue how powerless, how helpless, how hopeless you feel? But Jesus, as he faced the cross, experienced the depths of human darkness and helplessness fully, probably more fully than any of us. He does understand. He lived the experience himself.

**Application:** About Matthew's painful portrayal of Jesus' garden agony, scholar N. T. Wright wrote, "When we ourselves find the ground giving way beneath our feet, as sooner or later we shall, Gethsemane is where to go. That is where we find that the Lord of the world, the one to

whom is now committed all authority (Matthew 28:18), has been there before us.” (Wright’s commentary on Matthew) In his humanity, Jesus’ feelings led him to say, “It’s as if I’m dying.” How can that help you trust that he knows firsthand whatever you are going through when the ground gives way beneath your feet?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, in my dark moments, help me remember you agonizing alone in the darkness of the garden. As my heart links to yours, remind me that I am never alone in the darkness. Amen.

### **Wednesday, July 14**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33, 11:27-30**

Right then, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came and he was alone. Meanwhile, the boat, fighting a strong headwind, was being battered by the waves and was already far away from land. Very early in the morning he came to his disciples, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified and said, “It’s a ghost!” They were so frightened they screamed. Just then Jesus spoke to them, “Be encouraged! It’s me. Don’t be afraid.” Peter replied, “Lord, if it’s you, order me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus said, “Come.” Then Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water toward Jesus. But when Peter saw the strong wind, he became frightened. As he began to sink, he shouted, “Lord, rescue me!” Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him, saying, “You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts?” When they got into the boat, the wind settled down. Then those in the boat worshipped Jesus and said, “You must be God’s Son!”

“My Father has handed all things over to me. No one knows the Son except the Father. And nobody knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wants to reveal him. “Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. <sup>30</sup> My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.”

**Observation:** The Sea of Galilee sat in a kind of geologic “bowl,” and was always subject to sudden, severe storms. The strong wind and waves were frightening enough. But when the disciples saw Jesus walking to their aid on the lake, these experienced fishermen “were so frightened they screamed.” Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid.” The reason? “It’s me.” Literally, Jesus says, “I am;” although this can mean, “It is I,” it may also be an allusion to Jesus’ deity (Exodus 3:14, where the same phrase is also used).

**Application:** Seeing Jesus walking on the lake terrified the disciples. Their own lack of power was frightening, but the idea of a power beyond their imagining was more so. Do you ever find the idea of God actually “showing up” a bit scary? In what ways does Jesus’ divine power reach beyond our usual human ideas? What gives you confidence that he always uses his power in ways that are good for you?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I need your rest, your peace, your freedom from fear. Help me to hold firmly to your claim to be the great “I AM,” who is always on my side and at work for my good. Amen.

**Thursday, July 15**

**Scripture: Psalm 46:1-7; Isaiah 40:26-31**

God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea, when its waters roar and rage, when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. *Selah*

There is a river whose streams gladden God's city, the holiest dwelling of the Most High. God is in that city. It will never crumble. God will help it when morning dawns. Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice; the earth melts. The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety. *Selah*

Look up at the sky and consider: Who created these? The one who brings out their attendants one by one, summoning each of them by name. Because of God's great strength and mighty power, not one is missing. Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, my God ignores my predicament"? Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn't grow tired or weary. His understanding is beyond human reach, giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

**Observation:** Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and tornados make us painfully aware that what we call solid ground can, in fact, fall apart. But personal and family foundations fall apart every day due to health problems, broken relationships, financial crises, and tragic deaths. Isaiah 40 spoke to Israelites who faced a long, hard trip on foot from Babylon to Israel after years of exile. Did God see their hardships? The psalms and prophets turned to this trust repeatedly: "God is our refuge and strength," and "those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength."

**Application:** When have you felt as if your world was falling apart? Have those times ever led you to the idea expressed in Isaiah 40:27: "My way is hidden from the Lord; my God ignores my predicament"? Is something making you feel that way right now? How can your faith in God's caring give you a stable place to stand even when everything else seems to be crumbling? If you're not in crisis, what makes it valuable to deepen your trust in God before the next time everything seems to fall apart?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you know firsthand about the joys and sorrows that are part of the deal of being human. Teach me how to look to you as my light and strength even at the most frightening times. Amen.

**Friday, July 16**

**Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:6-9, 16-18**

God said that light should shine out of the darkness. He is the same one who shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay pots so that the awesome power belongs to God and doesn't come from us. We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren't crushed. We are confused, but we aren't depressed. We are harassed, but we aren't abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren't knocked out.

So we aren't depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day. Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison. We don't focus on the things that can be seen but on the things that can't be seen. The things that can be seen don't last, but the things that can't be seen are eternal.

**Observation:** Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to a community of Christians, many of whom had turned against him (even though he himself had brought them to faith!). It was a painful disappointment, after years of struggles as he traveled and shared Jesus in the Roman world (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). Yet he trusted that, if he kept his inner spiritual focus on God's eternal love, nothing in this world could crush or destroy him.

**Application:** Paul's description of himself as a "clay pot" (verse 7) wasn't false modesty. It was a way to recognize the abiding truth, with which all of us must wrestle with at times, that God is God and we are not. How can learning to see yourself as a "clay pot" help put you in a better position to avoid feeling crushed by any type of human blows to your ego?

**Prayer:** Lord God, some days all I can see are my failures, my setbacks, and my pain. On those days especially, I really need your grace to show me life as you see it, to show me your reality. Amen.

**Saturday, July 17**

**Scripture: Psalm 139:4-12**

There isn't a word on my tongue, LORD, that you don't already know completely. You surround me—front and back. You put your hand on me. That kind of knowledge is too much for me; it's so high above me that I can't reach it. Where could I go to get away from your spirit? Where could I go to escape your presence? If I went up to heaven, you would be there. If I went down to the grave, you would be there too! If I could fly on the wings of dawn, stopping to rest only on the far side of the ocean—even there your hand would guide me; even there your strong hand would hold me tight! If I said, "The darkness will definitely hide me; the light will become night around me," even then the darkness isn't too dark for you! Nighttime would shine bright as day, because darkness is the same as light to you!

**Observation:** Have you ever feared that God had given up on you? Or maybe had a time when you tried to run away from God, either in shame or in defiance? The psalmist said that no matter where we go God goes there with us. But this sweeping poem didn't merely assert God's inescapable presence. By itself, that could be depressing! It also told believers that God's presence is a good thing, because God's purpose in being with us is always to guide, strengthen and support us.

**Application:** Suppose someone put all the promises in this psalm into an infomercial for God. Would you believe them? Would you want to have a God watch over you so faithfully and patiently? Which parts of your life, of yourself, do you keep the most hidden? God knows all about them—and sees you with compassion and love anyway. What helps you experience God's presence? What spiritual difference does that make for you?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, at my worst, I feel like hiding from you. At my best, I want you to stay with me all the time – and that's exactly what you've promised to do. Amen.