

What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do – 4. It's Okay to Not Be Okay

Ruth 1:11-21

May 14, 2023

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We are week four of our sermon series, What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do. Today's message may be the most important message in this series as we remember that it is okay to not be okay. We'll begin in the Old Testament book of Ruth, spend some time in the book of Psalms and then end in the New Testament with words from the Apostle Paul. These are all scriptures that affirm that it is indeed okay to not be okay.

Today we begin with the story of Naomi. To understand what is going on here, let me give you a little bit of the back story. The story begins with a family of Israelites facing a time of famine and making the decision to move away from the little town of Bethlehem. When you think of this famine, think of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The mother in the family is Naomi and she travels with her husband and two sons to the land of Moab in search of a better life. Naomi's husband dies there, but her two sons marry Moabite women —Orpah and Ruth. After about 10 years, both sons die and so Naomi is left with only her two daughters-in-laws. In ancient times, there was nothing worse than being a widow. They were looked down on, ignored and taken advantage of. These three deaths brought great grief upon these three women, but especially for Naomi. She was overcome by her sorrow and expressed it by saying, *“Don't call me Naomi, but call me Mara, for the Almighty has made me very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has returned me empty.”*

In Hebrew, Naomi means pleasant or joyful. Mara means bitter. For the people of Israel, their names referred to their personal identities, who they were and how they saw themselves. These words of Naomi suggest that her experience of loss pushed her to the point of redefining/renaming herself by her bitterness. After the death of her husband and her two sons, her hope for the future was shattered. She acknowledged that as her joy turned to bitterness, the sense of being full turned to a sense of emptiness.

But in her state of “not being okay,” she was completely honest with God expressing her anger towards God, whom she felt had brought calamity upon her. Instead of turning away from or disbelieving in God, she brought all those feelings to God in prayer. She was not chastised (either by God, religious leaders, or her loved ones) for having negative feelings or being honest with God.

Can you think of a time when you felt like Naomi? Perhaps when a friend asks, “How are you?” you instinctively reply, “Fine, thanks,” regardless of whether it's true. Do you know that the acronym FINE means when you are not fine?

F=Frustrated

I=Insecure

N=Nervous

E=Emotional

In worship services, we proclaim that “God is good all the time . . . All the time God is good,” but there might be times when you feel that life is just unfair and you are asking God, “Why?” Perhaps you are in one of those times right now. You have recently lost a loved one. Mother's Day may not be a day of celebration for you. Maybe your heart is breaking over the continued gun violence in this county, or over the ongoing war or because of concern over the condition of our planet. And the uplifting songs and personal testimonies in worship are often difficult to

identify with in the midst of the suffering and hardship so there is all too often no room for our “not-OK” experiences in our Christian communities.

In the 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 in lament: 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.”*

Lamentation is a powerful tool that God’s people use to navigate our pain and suffering. More than a third of the psalms in the Bible are psalms of lament. Some of the psalms are individual laments, while others are community laments. Regardless, **lamentation is vital** because it helps us while we are in the pit of our pain and difficulty. It’s a cry to God, begging or petitioning God to rescue us from our agony. Lamentation is much like the “ouch” we utter when something hurts us physically, only it’s directed toward God. And at its core, lamenting is an act of faith, for God is the only One who can do something about our pain. When we lament, we acknowledge that God is everything. And in our weakness, we call out to our God knowing God is there.

In his book, *It’s Okay to Not Be Okay*, Rev. Dr. Rico Villanueva uses the psalms to teach us that in the presence of God, there is room to be “not-OK” and that our negative experiences don’t have to be ignored. In fact, he challenges us to confront our struggles and questions instead of denying them. Most importantly, to remember that we are invited to bring our whole selves into the presence of God and the community of faith. **For it is through our experiences and sharing them with God and God’s church that we grow closer to God and closer to each other.**

In the aftermath of COVID, many of us are still experiencing a full range of emotions brought on by the pandemic, sadness, helplessness, anger, loneliness, depression, and boredom. So, we need to ask, are we really okay? Or do we just believe that we need to look, act and sound okay? Our American culture dictates that we are self-sufficient, self-made and that we should just pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. It is not okay to look weak, vulnerable, or powerless, no matter what we are feeling on the inside. But mental health professionals would say, don’t ignore your feelings because it will only delay your health and wellbeing.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, so I want to devote part of our time together today to talking about mental health. We are facing a mental health crisis in our nation. Our children and teens are facing record levels of sadness, self-harm, and suicide risks. This crisis for teens started well before the pandemic but has only worsened since 2020. For our seniors, the National Council on Aging reports that between 25-30% (or 20 million) older adults have reported mental health disorders including trauma, anxiety, and depression. So, what can we do about this?

It is important to be able to talk about mental health in order to de-stigmatize it. Something happens when we shine a light on those things that are hidden. When we acknowledge what is, we invite others to come alongside us and seek the resources to help. The first step toward healing and wholeness is acknowledging something is not right.

We talk about our physical health all the time. My tooth ached a couple of weeks ago and so I went to the dentist and guess what? I need a crown! We talk freely about our mental health but... your brain is the most powerful organ in your body. A thousand laptops do not have the storage capacity of your brain. And it determines everything in your body. When my computer

gets a glitch, I try to fix it and when all else fails, I restart the computer. But often even that doesn't work so I call Tony – Tony's our IT guy. And when there's a problem with my brain or my emotions– 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.** And you don't need special training to have an open, authentic conversation about mental health. It can lead to understanding where someone is with their mental health and helping them get support or treatment if needed. Here are some quick pointers from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention that you can use for having a real conversation with the people in your life.

Let people know you're willing to talk about mental health. The easiest way to let people know you're willing to talk about mental health is to be open about yourself. If you've seen a mental health professional in the past, when the subject comes up, you might say, in your own words: "I've had times in my life when I've struggled."

For me, it was in May of 2020. We were just a couple of months into our COVID lock down when George Floyd was murdered. In the days that followed, I spent way too much time glued to the TV watching live news reports of the protesting and rioting in Minneapolis. I began to experience feelings of anxiousness like I never had before. Many nights, I couldn't sleep because my mind and my heart were racing. So, one morning, after lying awake all night because of my erratically racing heart, I called the doctor. I thought there was something physically wrong with my heart. What I discovered was that my mounting anxiety was indeed affecting my physical health. She prescribed me a low dose of an antidepressant that I still take at bedtime today. It just helps to quiet my mind so that I can fall asleep. I also see a certified spiritual director on a regular basis. He helps me reconnect with God if ever I'm feeling spiritually fatigued, disconnected, and fragmented. I'm not ashamed to tell you that. **Be ready and willing to share your story.**

What can you say to someone you think may be struggling? Trust your gut if you think someone is having a hard time, speak to them privately. Start with an expression of care, followed by an observation. "I care about you, and I've noticed you haven't been yourself lately and I'm wondering how you're doing." You can normalize mental health by talking about it directly. Let them know you get it, and that it's okay – and normal – to struggle in response to life's challenges.

The timing doesn't have to be perfect. You may not always be able to speak with someone the moment you notice they might be struggling. It's fine to circle back some other time soon. "The other day I noticed you seemed upset. I'm really concerned about how you're doing. Want to grab a cup of coffee or go for a walk?" Sometimes creating some space is the perfect thing to do. Let them know you can have the conversation at a time that's right for them.

Would they be more comfortable talking to someone else? If you suspect the other person might be more comfortable talking with someone else, you can offer to help connect them. Here are some numbers that you can call or text for help. I encourage all of you, right now, to take out your phones and snap a picture because you never know when you might need this information.

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988
- Throughout Minnesota: call ****CRISIS (**274747)**
- Crisis Text Line: is available for free, 24/7 by texting MN to 741741

And the church? The church has a unique ability to make a difference. In a 2017 Psychology Today report, we read: *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.

And I would agree with this if you are in a church that is healthy and focused on the gospel message of God's love, grace, and forgiveness. You know, mental health disorders are not new. Humans have struggled with this throughout history. People in biblical times knew PTSD, depression, anxiety, and thoughts of self-harm. Moses and Elijah prayed to God to die. Life had become so overwhelming for them that they didn't want to live anymore, but they didn't give up – and God strengthened them. Or in the book of Job when the bottom falls out of Job's life and even his closest friends ridiculed him, and his wife suggested 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. You know, Jesus spent his life with hurting people. That is precisely what Jesus came to do.

Can you think of a time when you've chosen to redefine yourself in a negative way because of something that happened or when you've struggled with not feeling okay? Or when have you chosen to stay away/walk away from people who are struggling or suffering? Often our first reaction is to become bitter and blame God. It is okay to be angry. Expressing anger and fear is a healthy and normal part of anyone's faith journey. We need not fear anger and bitterness in ourselves or others. God's love and grace are bigger than all our pain and anger.

When we say that we are okay and we are not, we are denying that we need God's grace and strength. Even in times of crisis, it is tempting to want to trust in our own strength and abilities. One expression of Christian courage is to resist temptations, but it takes courage to acknowledge that we are not okay. It takes courage to trust that God's power is brought to perfection in our weakness.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul, writing to the first century Christians living in Corinth, offers them (and us) a different perspective on weakness. Paul is teaching from his own lived-life experiences. We know that Paul suffered from some type of disability, and he wasn't really okay with the limitations of what he called, the "thorn in his flesh." This may have been malaria, epilepsy, or a disease of the eye, we don't know for sure. He prayed three times asking God to take it away and instead he heard God speak, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" So, *I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*" 2 Corinthians 12:9.

From that moment, Paul understood this paradoxical truth, that when we let God take over our weakness, God's grace and strength make us stronger.

So, how can we be supportive and walk alongside one another regardless of where we are? How can we build healthy ways of expressing our honest emotions to God? God gives us room to not be okay but calls us to be together in the midst of our struggles, like Naomi and Ruth. 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.

Since 2018, the hallway outside my office door has become a food shelf for families in our childcare center who are experiencing food insecurity. We call it Totes for Hope. How does the food get there? God doesn't miraculously send food from heaven and fill the shelves overnight. You do that. God works through you to provide the funds, to shop for the food and keep the

shelves filled with food. We listened to the needs of those in our community who did not have enough food to feed their children. How does Jesus accomplish this? 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. God gives us room to not be okay but calls us together in the midst of our struggles.

Let's pray: Lord, help me to remember, even when times get tough, it's okay to not be okay. And that you welcome all of me into your presence. Help me to trust you. Help me to walk with you. Take my hurts, my pains, and my doubts and use them for good. And help me to pay attention to those around me who need my help and care. In Christ's name, Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 14, 2023

Weekly Prayer

God of mercy and grace, touch and heal my brokenness and lift me out of pain and despair. Dry the tears of my hurts. Comfort and nourish me with the many blessings of your powerful love. Let me also be an instrument of healing to people and a world that is hurting. In your name, I pray. Amen.

Monday, May 15

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 most 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, May 16

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 (cf. Luke 22:44) 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." 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, May 17

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. 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,' the activity in the context supports an allusion to Jesus' deity.

Application

Scholar N. T. Wright said that in Matthew 11, Jesus gave "the most welcoming and encouraging invitation ever offered. 'Come to me,' he said, 'and I'll give you rest.'" How does that work? "The ease and the joy, the rest and the refreshment which he offered, all spring from his own inner character, his gentleness and warmth to all who turn to him, weighed down by burdens moral, physical, emotional, financial or whatever. He is offering what he has in himself to offer." In what ways have you allowed Jesus to give you rest? How can you expand that to other parts of life?

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, May 18

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 "worlds" 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 if 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, May 19

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 won 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, May 20

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. Jesus began the Lord’s Prayer (which we say each week in worship) with “Our Father who is in heaven.” “Heaven” translates the Greek word ouranōs, which meant, not a place far away, but “air,” “sky,” “heavens.” Jesus was not saying God is far away, but around us, above us, even within us, wherever we go—the same idea as verses 7-12 in today’s reading. 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.