

“Biblical Perspectives on Suicide.”

On March 29 of this year, Noel Head took his own life. He had just turned 50, he was facing a divorce, struggling in his relationship with his kids, he had lost a job. He was getting help, counseling, medical help, he even had a Stephen Minister. He attended church here at Saint Paul's. He had people who cared about him, but on March 29 he took his own life leaving behind people who cared about him deeply; leaving behind a note that simply said, "I'm sorry." Noel was a husband, a father, a son. He may have sat next to you in worship one Sunday. Two of our own church members who were concerned about him found him in his home. In the last two weeks I've heard about three people close to some of you who have been suicidal and I've talked to another who was in the past but made it through.

I've preached on this before and I feel led to do so again. Because each year there are 50% more deaths from suicide than homicide. There is one suicide committed every 17 minutes in the U.S. For each person that commits suicide there are an average of 6 loved ones left behind. Six people whose lives are changed forever. Most of us in this room know someone who has tried to commit suicide. Many of you in this room have personally known someone who has taken their own life. Some of you here have lost a loved one to suicide. I have ministered to people who have contemplated and attempted suicide and I have done the funeral of one young woman who committed suicide. I have ministered to the families of people who have committed suicide.

This is a very, very important issue for us to be talking about. It's important for us today because it's something that Christ-followers need to understand and face. When people consider or attempt suicide they are looking for answers, and I believe that we, as Christians, have some answers that can help us and others in moving beyond this and into hope. It is important that we talk about these things.

There are some additional facts about suicide that I'd like for you to know as we begin. Every year more than 30,000 people take their own lives. At least 600,000 people attempt suicide. Some experts think that figure's low. Some think that 600,000 **teenagers** attempt suicide every year. Suicide is the **eighth** leading cause of death for all Americans. It's the **third** leading cause of death among teenagers (after accidents and homicide). The teen suicide rate has increased 200% in the last 40 years but has recently been on the decline. As many as 6,000 teens will commit suicide this year. That means 16 teenagers a day, 16 teenagers **today**, in this country, will take their own lives. Four times as many boys as girls take their own lives. But four times as many girls **attempt** suicide.

[SLIDE...] **Why do people commit suicide?** Why is it that people get to a place where they feel like there is no other way? There are actually lots of reasons; many of them are linked to depression and despair. Let's talk about teenagers. Because often the teenage years are a time of transition and change. The whole world seems to be shifting around us and our thoughts and emotions go haywire. We go off to school and inevitably face rejection of some sort, and sometimes we get our hearts broken. So many things go on and we don't know how to make sense of it all. Things that are small seem so huge when we're going through all those changes.

The adults I have talked to who have contemplated suicide have been people who are struggling with a sense of hopelessness and despair and feeling like there's no other way. Some people I have spoken with have contemplated suicide because of an element of **shame** in their life. There was some secret in their life that was about to be revealed and they've thought that if that secret was revealed then the whole world would come crashing in. They felt so guilty and ashamed that they wanted to end it all.

Some people, because of the way that depression distorts things, begin to see the world in ways that are not reality. Being depressed is like seeing everything out of focus, and small things can seem huge, big things seem utterly overwhelming, so that all it takes is one straw that breaks the camel's back. In the midst of depression things can seem insurmountable.

Alcohol and drugs often play a role in suicide. We think we can medicate ourselves when we're feeling down. We drink or take drugs and think that it will make us feel better. And it might, for a little while, but in the end they actually take us lower into the cycle of depression instead of lifting us up.

And many times, people who are contemplating suicide, even though they're Christians, end up pushing God away in the times they need God most! They stop spending time in prayer and developing a relationship with Christ. They feel like there's no use in going to church any more. They turn their back on the

scriptures. So even though deep down they believe in God and trust in Christ, the one thing that might be able to pull them out of depression is the one thing they turn away.

These are a few reasons why people contemplate suicide, but let's also talk about **[SLIDE...]** **indicators of those who are contemplating suicide.** They include the more obvious things like talking openly about committing suicide, talking about how the world would be better without them, talking about other people who have committed suicide and saying things like, "They don't have to suffer any more." They might ask questions about what it would be like without them. If they're angry they may make statements like, "You'll miss me when I'm gone." Or "I'll get you in the end." They may make jokes about these sorts of things. Other signs can be withdrawal from friends, changes in eating and sleeping habits, crying, giving away personal possessions, and subtle references to "leaving." Traumatic anniversary dates like the death of a loved one or the date of a divorce are times when people contemplate suicide. So many times the signs are there and we don't see them, or we don't want to. Sometimes they're hard to see, unless we're really paying attention. So we must pay attention. We must choose to see.

But what do you do if someone you know is showing these signs or just outright tells you, "I'm thinking about killing myself and ending it all"? Let me talk to the teenagers and kids for a second. If one of your friends at school tells you that they're thinking about committing suicide, or they tell you that they wouldn't be missed if they were gone and nobody would really care, listen to them and take them seriously. **But then you've got to tell somebody.** You might think, "But my friend told me not to tell anybody! They said, 'I'll be so mad at you that I won't be your friend anymore and I won't tell you anything anymore.'" But listen, which would you rather have, a friend that's alive and mad at you for a little while, or a friend that's never going to talk to you again because they're gone?

If somebody you know is talking about killing themselves, take that seriously and talk to a parent, tell a teacher, tell a pastor, tell a counselor, tell a police officer if you have to...talk to somebody to find help. And parents, if your child comes to you and says, "My friend is thinking about committing suicide," what do you do? Do you call the parents or not call? Listen. Apply the golden rule. What would you want someone else to do if they had that information about one of your kids? You'd want them to call you and tell you that, wouldn't you? As awkward as it might be please reach out to those parents and tell them that there is something serious going on.

In general, if someone you know tells you that they are thinking about committing suicide, **let them know you care. Don't try to give pat answers,** instead let them know that you care about them and that you would miss them if they were gone. Let them know that there is hope and that maybe there's another perspective that they're not seeing. Help them get help. Make calls with them and for them, take them to a counselor, a doctor. Do what you can. Give them a suicide hotline number. The local number is 781-4031, the 800 number is 800-247-0661. Both of these numbers are answered 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Finally, if someone is suicidal, **don't leave them alone.** Find someone to stay with them. Call a family member, stay with them yourself through the crisis. Usually the crisis passes. 90% of all people who attempt suicide never attempt it again. They attempt it and then the crisis passes and they're able to move through that difficult time. Stay with that person or find someone who can until the crisis passes.

Here's what I want you to know if you are thinking of suicide. **Suicide leaves terrible tragedy in its wake.** So many suicide notes indicate that the person thinks that they are fixing a situation, but that is never the way it turns out. It always affects people and those who are left behind are more susceptible to committing suicide. Listen to the beginning of this suicide letter that was written almost 40 years ago. "Dear Mom and Dad, I know you're disappointed in me but this is the only door I could find for the best for the children." This is a common thought for those contemplating suicide. They think it's the way to do the right thing for their children, or parents or spouse. This same woman wrote another letter to her four children telling them of her love for them and how this seemed to be the only way and the right way.

But here's the story of that family: The four children of that woman all struggled with depression. All of them have been married and divorced, and all of them bear the marks of that experience 40 years later. One of those four children, a son now almost 60, said, "You know, there are still times when I wake up in the night and cry out for my mom. You talk about feeling abandoned. There's nothing quite like this. I spent 8 and half years in a federal penitentiary on drug charges. I've been a drug addict most of my life. Married and divorced, married and divorced. All of these years, and mom thought she was doing what was best for us." His sister, the one who found her mother, cried as she said, "For six years after my mom committed suicide, every night I

had nightmares...every night. I'm 54 years old and now 36 years later at least twice a year I still have nightmares about my mother. How could she think this was the best thing for the children?"

Some people believe that it takes courage to commit suicide, but it doesn't. Do you know what really takes courage? It takes courage to hang in there when it feels like your whole world is falling apart at the seams, because there are people around you that are going to hurt if you do this thing. It takes courage to hang in there when you feel like there is no hope because you know that at least there's going to be hope for someone else. It takes courage to do that. It doesn't take courage to take your life. A father whose teenage son committed suicide wrote this: "Suicide not only destroys the life of its victim, it destroys the hopes and dreams the survivors had for that person's life. At first there is pain, sharp and unrelenting. It's literally gut wrenching. You don't sleep, you don't eat. You lose interest in life itself. In addition to mourning a loss, a death to suicide compounds the grieving by adding all those other self-destructive emotions: guilt, blame, confusion, disgust, anger and a deep sense of failure. Eventually you just learn to live with the emptiness. But the pain of losing a loved one to suicide is forever." **The bottom line is that suicide is not good for anybody.**

One of the questions that people ask when someone has committed suicide is this, "Is my loved one in heaven or hell?" That's an important theological question. A common belief is that suicide is a sin that you can't repent from so that if you commit suicide you go straight to hell. But that is not what we believe. First we need to understand the reason why we should not commit suicide. You see, your life is a gift from God, you don't own it. It's not your body, it's God's body. It's not your soul, it's God's soul. 1 Corinthians says this, **[SLIDE...]** **"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you...? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, NIV).** God gave you this life and he has certain things he wants you to accomplish in the world, he has potential that he's built in to your life and it's not yours to dispose of. It's not your right to take it away...only God has that right.

This means that if you take you own life you are stepping over a boundary, eliminating the potential that God gave you, you are snuffing out a gift that was only God's to take...and that is a sin. But listen to what the church believes. It says, **[SLIDE...]** **"A Christian perspective on suicide begins with an affirmation of faith that nothing, including suicide, separates us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). Therefore, we deplore the condemnation of people who complete suicide, and we consider unjust the stigma that so often falls on surviving family and friends."** Another church puts it this way, **[SLIDE...]** **"We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for repentance."**

When I was a pastor in Blue Springs I did the funeral for a young woman who had committed suicide. It was tragic. I have thought about her and that funeral. I have been to funerals of others who have committed suicide. Some of them were baptized in Christ and when they were baptized God made a promise to them. God said, "This one belongs to me. This is one of my lambs and I will never let this one go." At some point in their life they professed their faith in front of the church, and of their own will, their own choice, they became Christians and followers of Jesus and they belonged to him. But they encountered a time in their lives that was so hard, so dark, and maybe they forgot to reach out to the one who could have rescued them. Would God turn his back on those people? Would God say, "Look, I know what you've been through and I know what you've done and I don't want anything to do with you." Or would God do what God does over and over and over again in our lives and reach out to them and hold them and keep them?

I visual that young woman who committed suicide entering the kingdom of heaven. I visualize God taking her in his arms and saying, "I need to tell you that I am disappointed in you. I built such potential into your life. I had so many things I wanted to do through you, so many great plans to bless you. If only you had persevered, talked to someone, if only you had been in the church and not pushed me away. I was there for you. This is not what I wanted for you...**But I love you...I still love you.**" That is the God I see in the gospels; the God I see in Jesus Christ.

But there are some people who are not in Christ. Some have rejected him all together. Some of those think that suicide is the final act of getting even with everybody who ever hurt them. Some people are so lonely that they can't imagine anything worse. But let me tell you something as plain as I can--you need to hear this. There is something far worse than the loneliness in this world. There is something far worse than the despair you'll face on this earth...and that's called eternal separation from God. There is no loneliness on

earth that even compares. Those who are in Christ are in Christ. They belong to him and God understands the struggles that we face. It's important to be in Christ.

What are some alternatives when you or someone you love is considering suicide? There are several I want to mention. The first is the one that most people turn to first: **[SLIDE...]** **Seek professional help and possibly medication.** There are many good Christian counselors and psychiatrists and I'm thankful for them. They play an important role in the healing process. There are also effective medications to help with depression. But please don't think you can recover from depression simply by taking a pill. Medication can level out the emotions, take away the drastic ups and downs, but it is only a temporary solution. Something more than medication is needed—get help through a counselor.

Another way to get help is through your friends. **[SLIDE...]** **Find friends who can lift you up** when you're down--not other depressed friends who will only bring you down further. Find friends who are strong in their faith who can lift you up. That's why it's important to be a part of church. But it's not enough to just come to worship on Sunday mornings, because you can't get to know each other just in worship, you can't take care of each other in worship. That's why small groups are so important. Sunday School classes, Bible Studies, the Alpha Course, the youth group. That's where you'll connect with people who will listen to you and stand by you.

There are over 1,000 people who call this their church home. The staff here cannot possibly call every person who is going through a time of struggle. That means that you have to be responsible for each other. God is calling you to do that. If you are in a small group and you see somebody struggling in Sunday School, or Men's Group, or Mom 2 Mom, or the choir or wherever, you reach out to them in love. God is calling you, commanding you to do that. To lift other people up. Galatians 6:2 says, **[SLIDE...]** **“carry one another's burdens and in so doing you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).** Carry each other's burdens.

Another thing to do is to **[SLIDE...]** **tell your family and friends when you are struggling with depression.** Let them know how serious it is. In so many of the suicides that happen in this country every year, those people didn't really want to die, they just wanted to cry out for help. Someone might think, “My mom and dad, or my friends, are so busy that they have no idea when I'm struggling. They don't pay attention, they don't know.” Yes, they should be paying better attention, but don't punish them for not paying attention. Grab them by the arm and sit them down and say, “I need you right now, please listen to me.” Many suicides were just cries for help that went too far. Please don't play that game. Let people know what's really going on in your heart. They would want to know and help.

Another good piece of advice is to **[SLIDE...]** **help other people.** One person said this, “When I started helping other people, my problems started to get smaller and smaller.” Taking the focus off of yourself by helping others is a great way to overcome those feelings of despair and depression.

Finally **[SLIDE...]** **the single greatest resource you have as Christians is your faith in Jesus.** We have a gospel of hope, it is good news. We have the information and the knowledge that God knows us and loves us more than we could imagine or believe. Hope rings through the entire Christian faith, and when we're in Christ and cultivating a relationship with Jesus it changes everything.

We need to remember today the words of the Psalmist that say in Psalm 30:5, **[SLIDE...]** **“Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”** We need to remember the words of Paul in Romans 8 where he says, **[SLIDE...]** **“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, NIV) No matter how dark the circumstances, no matter how bleak your situation, God is able to make something good come from that.** Or in Romans in 8:38 he says, **[SLIDE...]** **“Nothing can separate us from the love of God... Neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** And then there are the words of Jesus himself. He said, **[SLIDE...]** **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28. NIV).**

Or maybe we need to remember the story of Judas. Judas was one of the 12, one of the apostles. Jesus personally chose Judas. He was with Jesus for three years. Judas watched the miracles, he prayed with people, he was one of the chosen ones. But after 3 years he didn't quite get it. He still thought Jesus was going to come as the triumphant king and overthrow the Romans and set the Jews free from oppression. But it wasn't happening that way. Judas had had enough of Jesus' preaching, talking, healing, miracles. Judas

wanted to see a rebellion! Maybe Judas was thinking, "All Jesus needs is a little nudge to start this rebellion." So he goes to the religious authorities and tells them that he'll take them to Jesus...for 30 pieces of silver.

And that's exactly what he does. He takes them to Jesus and identifies him with a kiss. But from that point things didn't go as Judas had hoped. When Jesus is seized, instead of inciting a rebellion, Jesus goes quietly before the courts. Judas stood by at a distance and watched as Jesus was ultimately crucified. Can you imagine what Judas must have been feeling? He takes those 30 pieces of silver and gives them back to the Pharisees thinking, "This isn't what I wanted. This isn't what was supposed to happen!" As he sees Jesus taken down from the cross he realizes what he's done. He's crucified his friend. He's crucified the Messiah. He's lost all his friends, all his hope. And in that dark time of despair, Judas went out and hung himself...

But here's what I want you to consider. **What would have happened if Judas had just waited two days?** What would have happened if Judas would have just waited until Sunday? Think about it. Jesus would have been risen from the grave, alive. Remember that Jesus went to Peter after Peter had denied him 3 times. He went to Peter to say, "Peter you still belong to me. I forgive you." Can you see Judas if he had just waited? Seeing Jesus standing there, going and falling at Jesus feet, "Jesus I'm sorry! This isn't what I thought would happen! I'm so glad you're alive! I'm so glad! Please forgive me!" Can you see Jesus taking Judas by the arm and lifting him up and saying, "Judas, Judas, I still love you. You are forgiven!"

Can you imagine what would have happened to Judas from that time forward? It wouldn't have been Peter or Paul who was the greatest disciple. It would have been Judas! He would have had a message! "I didn't understand Jesus. I led the soldiers to Jesus. I'm the one who sold him out and betrayed him. They killed him and I helped them. I was ready to take my own life, I thought I didn't deserve to live, I was despairing. I wanted to die, but something stopped me from taking my life. And then I saw him alive! I fell at his feet and he lifted me up and forgave me. And if he could forgive **me**, what could he do for you?!"

Can you see the power that he would have had to proclaim the gospel? He would have been the greatest apostle that ever lived...If only he had waited two days. You see, suicide is very real and it's forever. It leaves in its wake a disaster. It misses out on the hope God wants us to have.

The scriptures say that Satan is the father of lies. And if he can whisper in your ear and convince you to take away the potential that God gave you; if he can convince you that you are worthless and that there is no hope; if he can convince you that the gospel was a lie; then he would succeed in his task. Don't let Satan do that! Don't listen to him, because God gave you your life and it's not yours to take. And Jesus is the Lord of Hope and with him there are no hopeless situations. He's the God of new beginnings. Never forget that. Never. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his sermon on this topic.