

“What About Suicide?”

Today we continue to wonder out loud. We're asking our tough questions knowing that God invites us to seek, to search, to ask. God's big enough to handle our questions. Today we wrestle with a question that a lot of you have asked. What about suicide? Is it an unforgiveable sin? How do we think about this as Christians? We're going to wrestle with this today.

On March 29 of 2005, 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 attended church here at Saint Paul's. He had people who cared about him, but 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. Two of our own church members who were concerned about him found him in his home.

Last week I attended a town meeting on suicide. It was a meeting that I walked away from realizing that there is a lot we can do to prevent suicide. Talking about it here today is one of those things that will literally save lives.

Every 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. Every year in the U.S. between 30,000 and 40,000 people take their own lives. For every death to suicide there are an estimated 12 to 25 attempts. Approximately 600,000 people attempt suicide in the U.S. each year. 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). Women are two times more likely than men to attempt suicide. But four times as many men as women take their own lives.

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 suicide, attempted suicide and I have done the funeral of one person 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 most often they are facing **the twin killers of helplessness and hopelessness**. I believe that Christians can be equipped to offer both help and hope. It is important that we talk about these things. It's also important that we answer the question of suicide that many of you have asked. One of you put it this way, "A close friend took his life recently. He was a baptized Christian, a good man, who simply got derailed in life. I've had people tell me that suicide is unforgivable. Is my friend in heaven or hell?"

First we need to ask the question, **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. Because of the way that depression distorts things, some people 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. But depression is treatable.

Another trigger for suicidal feelings is crisis and change. A relational break up, the changes of aging, bullying, humiliation, a health crisis, chronic pain. All can cause people to have suicidal feelings.

Substance abuse often plays 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.

Some people contemplate suicide as a way out because someone else they know has taken their own lives. They can begin to think, "It was a way out for them, it can be for me too."

If we're going to be equipped as Christians to help prevent suicide we need to talk about **Warning signs 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. When people are in long-term pain, or facing a difficult illness, they are more likely to consider suicide—especially if they are over 65. 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 is showing signs of having suicidal thoughts? First, **give them emotional support.** Don’t tell them how wrong they are, take them seriously and offer to get help. **Don’t try to give pat answers,** instead let them know that you care about them. **Let them know that there is hope** and that maybe there’s another perspective that they’re not seeing. Then, **help them get help.** Make calls with them and for them, take them to a counselor, a doctor. Do what you can.

But what if someone is not just expressing suicidal thoughts? **What if someone is suicidal?** What if they just outright tell 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.

First and foremost, if someone you know tells you that they are thinking about committing suicide, **do not leave them alone.** Stay with them, find someone to stay with them, get them to the emergency room, call 911 if you have to.

Second, **Eliminate access to firearms** or any potential tools for suicide.

Third, **call or have them call a suicide hotline number.** The local number is **781-4031**, the national number is **800-273-8255.** Both of these numbers are answered 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

And, of course, as the crisis passes, **help them get professional help.** Encourage positive action.

Here’s what I want you to know if you are thinking of suicide. **Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem and 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 even more susceptible to committing suicide.

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. But first we need to understand the reasons 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. 1 Corinthians says this, **“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 at the same time we believe what Romans 8 says, that nothing can separate us from the love of God...not even suicide.

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 not pushed me away and stayed connected to a church family. 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 completely. 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. 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 can you do when you or someone you love is considering suicide? There are several things I want to mention. The first is the one that most people turn to first: **Seek professional help.** There are many good Christian counselors and psychiatrists. They play an important role in the healing process. There are also effective medications to help with depression—there is no shame in utilizing them if your doctor thinks it necessary.

Another way to get help is through your friends. **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 and get plugged in to group, or class of some sort. Galatians 6:2 says, **“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 **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.” 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 **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 **The 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 word of God in scripture. Where we hear words like, **"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5)**. Peter wrote, **"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7)**. And the words of Jesus where he said, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1)**. He said, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28. NIV)**.

I think we also need to remember the stories of Peter and Judas. Peter denied knowing Jesus, swore an oath that he didn't know the man, ran and hid. Judas betrayed Jesus—sold him out for 30 pieces of silver. Many scholars believe that Judas wanted Jesus to lead a rebellion against Rome and sold Jesus out to push him, to set the rebellion against Rome into motion. Judas realized after the crucifixion that his plan didn't work. And when Judas realized what he had done, he gave back the money and then he took his own life.

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? Judas would have had the most amazing message! "I didn't understand Jesus. I led the soldiers to him. 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 disaster in its wake. It misses out on the hope God wants us to have.

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.

Lord God you know us by name and you know our stories. You know that there are people sitting here today that have already turned their backs on you, they've felt hopeless, they've given up on praying and church and you. But for some reason they are here today. We know that that's a divine appointment, that you wanted to meet them here today, to speak them, help them to reach out to you.

There are some here today who are Christians that struggle with depression. They may have forgotten that you are the Lord of hope. They may have forgotten that you are there and have a plan. They can't see that there's something beyond their present circumstances, but help them to see that today. Help them to know what might be in their lives. Remind them that you can take the dark things and make something good come from them.

Help us all to reach out to our friends and to be the kind of church where people are loved and cared for. Help us.

There are some of here today with your heads bowed and your eyes closed and you know that this message was for you. And all you have to do to be a Christian and make that hope your own is say, "Jesus, come into my life. I need you to save me." And as you begin that relationship with him and as you get involved in church and a small group, you begin to find hope. So ask him in today. In Christ's name, Amen.

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