

TEXT: Romans 12:1-8
THEME: Transformed by the renewal of your mind
SUBJECT: Discerning what is good
TITLE: Mental Health

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
23 August 2020
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

“I’d like to take a moment to share something that has been on my mind lately.

“Twenty years ago this summer I was on the cusp of the biggest medical crisis of my life. It came as a big surprise. No, not the fact of a medical crisis. I knew I wasn’t immune from life. Everybody gets something.

“The surprise was that it turned out to be me. If there had been any history of mental illness in my family, no one had ever talked about it.

“That summer, twenty years ago, I was being treated for hives when my first low grade depression was first observed. It arrived, like this pandemic, out of the blue. I didn’t see it coming.

“Many of us have been taxed to the limit by lockdown stress, family tensions, job loss, and then of course, the virus. I don’t give medical advice, but help is available. The first step is talking.” This is how Jane Pauley began a segment of the show “Sunday Morning” on CBS this past Sunday.

Her personal story was followed by statistics, numbers that reveal how many of us are taxed to the limit. Roughly one in twelve Americans reported symptoms of an anxiety disorder at this time last year; that has risen to more than one in three today, according to the National Center for health statistics.

A recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll reports that, for the first time, a majority of American adults believes the pandemic is taking a toll on mental health.

A just released report from the CDC indicates 11% of Americans, 36 million of us, seriously considered suicide in June. That is double the percentage from 2018. Rates were highest among 18-24 years old and unpaid care givers for adults.

As I listened to this report I was saddened, stunned and not stunned. Stunned by how many of us see no way out, not stunned by the stress created by the pandemic and its consequences. The suffering and death of those who contract COVID-19, the grief endured by their families and friends, the economic anxiety created by the failure to constructively respond to the pandemic diminishes us all.

Judged by the jokes making the rounds on social media—I stepped onto my scale this morning and it said, “Please use social distancing, one person at a time”; Having booze stored in every

room in the house is the new form of bar hopping—we have two popular ways of coping: eating and drinking.

I, like Jane Pauley, do not give medical advice. For that call your doctor. If you see no way out, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255. What I can tell you is something I heard decades ago when working in a State Hospital: We often see the world not as it is but as we are.

I didn't believe this when I first heard it. I have come to see its wisdom over the years. That does not mean the world is in great shape. It isn't. But it does mean, as Paul knew, that we cannot discern what is good and acceptable and perfect (fulfilling its purpose, its reason for being) if our minds are sick. To discern the way forward, according to Paul, we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

The word translated “mind” is “nous.” It is that aspect of the human being which is considered the seat of intellectual and moral judgment. The metamorphosis is not external but internal. Change follows a renewal of our whole way of thinking, a renewal of the intellect. The famed philosopher and psychologist, William James, put it this way “When we change our thinking we change our lives.”

C. S. Lewis suffered from depression during the first half of his life. The loss of his mother, rejection by his father, and the cruelty of a headmaster at his first boarding school all played a role in it. Some of his gloomy outlook he attributes to his father, who “represented adult life as one of incessant drudgery under the continual threat of financial ruin.” Work, work, work, then we die.

Lewis realized his pessimism resulted from how he thought about and viewed the world. “Working against my faith, there was in me a deeply ingrained pessimism; a pessimism, by that time, much more of the *intellect* than of feeling.” His many biographers as well as his close friends emphasize how profoundly his change of worldview altered his life, in particular his capacity to experience happiness.

According to Dr Armand Nicholi, retired clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts General Hospital, Lewis' way of thinking about the world was transformed first by discovering a new method of establishing his identity. The process involved losing himself in relationship to the Creator. To think rightly about himself meant thinking of himself *in relation*, not just to himself, but to God.

His understanding of Agape—of loving one's neighbor by wanting the best for her and exercising one's will to act accordingly—also took Lewis outside himself. He developed a capacity to step outside his own needs sufficiently to become aware of the needs of others and to exercise his will to meet those needs.

His evaluation of people changed. “There are no *ordinary* people. Your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.” This change in his thinking forced him to set new priorities in his life—the first priority given to his relationship with God, the second priority, to his relationships with others.

The quality of our relationships is a pretty fair barometer of our emotional health. Nothing brought Lewis more enjoyment than sitting around a fire with a group of close friends engaged in good discussion, or taking long walks with them through the English countryside. “Friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief happiness of life. There is no sound I like better than laughter.”

In our “pandemic TV watching” (insufficient concentration to read) we stumbled upon an Australian version of “Friends,” adolescent drama (First World problems) dominating the lives of thirty-something privileged folk. It dawned on me in the middle of the night why I keep watching it. Once a week these friends surrender their smartphones to a bucket and sit down to dinner. They call these gatherings F.A.T. nights, “food appreciation time.” They gather around a table, share good conversation, fun, laughter and sometimes drama.

I miss sitting around with a *group* of friends, with you at a church dinner, enjoying food, banter, the laughter evoked by children at play. This pandemic forces us inside: inside our homes, inside our bubbles, inside our heads/minds. The impact on our hearts, on our relationships, is enough to make an introvert depressed.

When we are depressed it is difficult to know what is good and acceptable and perfect. Clouds cover the *nous*, the horizon disappears. Our whole view of life becomes myopic, narrow and self-focused. This darkness, which *feels* very real, which is indeed real, cannot be allowed to make us *think* it is the only reality, the whole of reality. The clouds will clear, the way forward will become visible.

To think soberly about ourselves, according to Paul, is to recognize that we need each other. Just as our bodies have many parts with specific functions, each necessary for the health of the whole person, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We have gifts that differ and each person, each gift, is necessary for the health of all. In other words, we are in this together!

PRAYER: Saint Makarios of Egypt (c. 283-390) spent 60 years, after being widowed as a young man, in the desert wilderness learning and teaching the life of prayer. Translated by Scott Cairns

Well yes, we have a need to pray, though not so much a prayer that's fixed to any habit of the body, nor to any public proclamation, nor tied to some particular custom of silence, and not necessarily fallen to our aching knees. Rather, we ought first to keep an attentive mind, leaning in expectantly, and waiting on God until He comes visiting the soul, making mysterious entry via any manner of countless paths—the openings and varied senses of the soul. Just so, we should be silent when we ought, or, on occasion, raise a piercing cry, or bruise our knees on stone—whatever—so long as the mind is attached wholly to God's approach. As the body, performing any demanding task, requires every member to join in fixed attention to the chore, so the soul demands such singleness of rapt pursuit, in loving movement to the Lord—undistracted, undeterred, but firm and watchful, expecting His arrival, even now.