

For those of you who do not know, May is Mental Health Awareness month. The United Church of Christ has recognized today as Mental Health Sunday. Many UCC churches across the United States and Canada are utilizing today to discuss mental health awareness. I think that this is such a great opportunity, especially since the pandemic.

I have spent the last 30 years studying mental health and discussing it on a number of different platforms. I started studying mental health in college because I was in a car accident my senior year of high school. As a result of the car accident, I had severe bouts of depression. I've spent years working through it and trying to help others work through it as well.

And since the pandemic, I've had so many people come and talk to me about their mental health. One person told me that she was surprised about how much she learned about herself during the lockdown. Her entire life she had been outgoing and was generally a "bubbly" person. She never thought that she had mental health opportunities.

My friend had learned that she enjoyed being away from people. She actually preferred to be home instead. She had spent so much time trying to make other people happy that she had never really focused on her needs and now she was being forced to deal with her issues.

Mental health affects all of us. Whether we realize it or not. Since the pandemic, every person either knows someone or has dealt with depression or anxiety themselves. Mental health is no longer an isolated incident. It affects all of us.

I was talking with a friend a couple of weeks ago about mental health. He said that the media exaggerates the influence of mental health. This shouldn't be a concern for the church because it isn't discussed in the bible. It is a modern problem and it will pass over time.

I asked him if he had ever read Psalm 88. I knew that he was going to tell me that he had. He enjoys quoting scripture and verse at any opportunity that he can. He told me that he had, but that he couldn't exactly remember what it said. Psalm 88 is known as the prayer of a near-hopeless individual.

¹O Lord, God of my salvation, when at night, I cry out in your presence, ²let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.

³For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. ⁴I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, ⁵like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. ⁶You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep. ⁷Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah*

⁸You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; ⁹my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you. ¹⁰Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? ¹¹Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon: ¹²Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness:

¹³But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. ¹⁴O Lord, why do you cast me off: Why do you hide your face from me? ¹⁵Wretched and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am desperate. ¹⁶Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me. ¹⁷They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me. ¹⁸You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness.

This psalm is known as the prayer of the near-hopeless. The psalmist is talking about an inner struggle that he is having that he doesn't understand. He doesn't understand why God has inflicted this upon him. He doesn't understand why everyone has left him to struggle through this alone.

I remember the first time that someone suggested that I read this. I was in graduate school and was struggling with depression. One day I was struggling more than most, and I had to gather data for a study I was working on. My job was to interview centenarians about their lives and I had set up an interview for that day.

I had been looking forward to that interview. The participant was 102 and had some great stories to share. I had met with her three times before that, so I expected the interview to go well and hopefully bring me into a better mood.

I got to the nursing home early, because she had asked me to come early. She would be watching her soap opera when I got there, and if I got there early, her care takers would leave the television in her room until after I was done. So, she would be able to sneak in a little more TV time before dinner.

When I got there that day, her nurse stopped me before I got to the room. She told me that Sally was having a bad day and she wanted to prepare me for that. I had no idea what to expect when I went into Sally's room. At 102 having a bad day could mean a number of different things.

Sally was sitting alone in the dark, crying. I didn't know what to do, so I sat down next to her. After about 10 minutes, I asked if she wanted me to leave and that I could come back at another time. She asked me to stay, but she didn't want to talk at that time.

After another 10 minutes she composed herself and asked me a question. She asked if I had ever read Psalm 88. I told her that I had read it, but truthfully I couldn't tell her what it said. Sally smiled at me and said that she was living Psalm 88 then, but that night she would read Ephesians 6:10-17 before bed and would live that tomorrow.

I didn't know what that meant. When I left, I asked her nurse what had upset her so much. They told Sally that morning that her granddaughter passed away and her service was the day before. At that point Sally had outlived her parents, twin sister and other siblings, her husband, all of her children, and now all of her grandchildren.

Even though she was fighting her depression that day. She knew that God had given her the tools to move past it. She was accepting her grief for the day, but the next day was a new day and she was going to use what God had given her to get through tomorrow and then the day after that.

We know that God has given us the tools that we need to enter the kingdom of heaven. We know that Jesus died for our sins so that our sins are forgiven. We know that he has shown us the righteous lifestyle for us to live for eternal life. And in Ephesians 6, we learn how we can use those tools to deal with our daily torments.

In today's scripture reading, Paul is telling us how the tools that God has given us can be used against our own inner demons. He is talking to us about using the gospel and the Holy Spirit to fight the unseen enemy and come out stronger.

Paul is utilizing the image of a suit of armor to show us how we can use God's tools to not only protect us, but also how to utilize them as weapons. He is showing us that through living a righteous lifestyle and holding on to the truth while holding on to our faith, we can be

protected. Jesus dying for our sins has granted us salvation and will protect us. The grace for entry into heaven, will protect us here on earth.

I found his generality for describing the shoes interesting. He doesn't go into great detail for the shoes, instead he leaves it to us. He tells us to use whatever we need to be ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. It is as though he realizes that everyone has a different interpretation of the gospel.

What I think about the gospels and how they apply to me, are not necessarily the same way that you think they apply to you. Parts that I find significant and have deep meaning to me, might seem less important to you. How each parable relates to me might not ever be the same from day to day. And Paul realizes this.

He sees that there can be differences in how we approach the gospel, not just between people, but for ourselves as well. But even with those differences, the gospel is the foundation. It is where and how we make our stand. Even though the significance of the gospel appears to be an afterthought, it is in fact the most significant and personal part of God's armor.

As we put these pieces together, we have a solid defense using the tools God has given us. But the final piece is the Holy Spirit and it serves as the weapon. We use God's love and word against our unseen enemy. And how do we do this? How do we fight something we can't see? We do it through reading the scripture and prayer.

God's love and word are meant to help us. They are meant to provide reassurance and protect us. They guide us through all times, good and bad. We can find hope and peace through prayer.

There is also one other important part about God's armor. It isn't just meant for one person. It is meant for all of us. Paul didn't write this letter to one individual. He wrote it to a group of people that he cared very deeply about.

Paul was significant in establishing christianity in Ephesus. He spent a significant amount of time there, not just establishing the church, but also later in his travels. He used Ephesus as a home for many years while preaching to the areas around it.

He is telling all of them to put on God's armor. He is establishing prayer warriors. And as an army, they can help one another. Much like we try to do now. We have our prayer circles and our Army of Angels. We help others and our community in ways that we have available.

We need to remember that we are not alone. Our struggles are not solely our own. Other people struggle with some of the same inner demons that we face. But, together through fellowship and prayer, we can battle these wars together. God is with us and protects us. Through him and his love, we are not alone.