In 1975, after my second year in divinity school, I spent the summer at St Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, DC. Founded by the mental health pioneer Dorothy Dix, St Elizabeths is the oldest and largest and most famous mental hospital in the Federal system.

Living on the grounds, I was an inmate of St E’s that summer – not as a patient, but as a student chaplain in training. During orientation I was issued those two symbols that separated the caregivers from those being cared for: a name badge, and a set of KEYS – keys that admitted me to the buildings and locked wards of the hospital, keys that admitted me to the world of the chronically mentally ill. The chaplains were newcomers and visitors to this world – the staff and patients were the real residents. The deeply troubled persons with whom I worked knew their world all too well – for most, St Elizabeths was the hospital of last resort. If you couldn’t get better there, you couldn’t get better, and there was no backdoor exit from St Elizabeths. Although I came after the era of long-term institutionalization of the mentally ill, there were still many patients there who had been there for years. Some for most of their lives.

Now, it wasn’t a One flew over the cuckoo’s nest world. The treatment was the best science had to offer, and for the most part the staff members were both competent and compassionate. The facilities, while Spartan and confining, were secure. Acts of cruelty by the staff were rare. But there was not much hope for the vast majority of the patients. It was hard to not lose heart. I doubt I was much help to the patients on my charge. But twenty-five years later, I can still affirm it was a summer that changed my life.

The world of the seriously mentally ill is quite different than the one I encountered in 1975. With the many advances that have been made, there is every reason to title a sermon on mental illness awareness do not lose heart. But for many folks, too many folks, their UNDERSTANDING of mental illness is stuck back somewhere in the back wards of an earlier era. A shroud of shame still envelopes the mentally ill and their families. A shroud I hope to unravel a bit this morning.

The mentally ill of today are NOT people confined to mental hospitals in straight jackets. Using an ever-expanding arsenal of medication, most persons who suffer from mental illness are freed from long-term hospitalization. Of those who suffer from serious mental illness, only 25% are serviced through institutional settings. Over 50% live with their families. The rest live independently, mostly in their own homes.

The mentally ill are not people “locked up in a nut house”. The mentally ill live in our community. They are our neighbors, our friends, our husbands, our wives, our children, ourselves. Chaplain Ernest Bruder, the founder of the chaplain training program at St Elizabeths, put it this way: “The mentally ill – deeply troubled persons - are just like ourselves, only more so.”

What does the church have to say about mental illness? I think we need to begin by shattering a few myths and misunderstandings.
First of all, we need to remember that mental illness IS an illness – not a character flaw. The only thing “wrong” with a deeply troubled person is that he is SICK. And it is not a SIN to be SICK! It is not a sin to be mentally ill.

Secondly, God does not punish people by making them mentally ill. That may be the impression you get from a number of Biblical passages, but such texts simply reveal the primitive mind of ancient peoples: the people who wrote the Bible did not understand mental illness. For that matter, they did not understand disease or human physiology. The Bible is not a book about science. It is a book about God and humankind’s search for God. We may not know more about God and the human condition than the ancients, but DO know about measles and chickenpox and leprosy and mental illness.

And third, even as God does not punish people by making them mentally ill, God will not heal your illness because you pray long enough or enough. Now, this may be difficult for you to hear. But our God is not a whimsical god. God is “no respecter or persons” as the scriptures say. That is, God does not play favorites, so that the popular will be healed while the lonely will not.

This is NOT to deny the possibility or reality of miracles. Accounts of the healing power of prayer abound. But I do not pray so that God will change God’s mind. I pray so that God will change MY mind.

In the beloved 23rd Psalm, recall that the promise of God is that God will be WITH US in the darkest valleys – not that the valleys will disappear.

Anton Boissen, the founder of the modern pastoral care movement, and a pioneer in the clinical training of ministers, gained many of his insights into the care of deeply trouble people from HIS OWN recurrent mental illness. The great Harry Emerson Fosdick, perhaps the most influential American preacher of the 20th century, was the first to bring to the pulpit the linkage between the gospel and the concerns of mental illness and mental health – a relationship he recognized because of his own struggles of soul and spirit.

In the New Testament, Paul is the first to recognize the power of the gospel to comfort and to heal the lives and spirits of deeply troubled persons. Nowadays Paul is often reviled as an acerbic acid tongued church leader who gave the people the choice between “my way or the highway”. But Paul also had a profoundly pastoral side, and his compassionate faith, and pastoral presence is nowhere more evident than in his words of encouragement in 2 Corinthians: recognizing that persons of faith – like persons everywhere – endure hardships of body, mind, and spirit, Paul writes, We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...So we do no lose heart. Paul had “been there, done that”. Paul knew something about the agonies of depression, disappointment, despair, and illness. Perhaps that chronic illness he refers to as his “thorn in his side” could even have been some form of mental illness. In any event, Paul was not discounting the burden of physical or mental illness with his affirmation that by the power of God we will prevail. Paul was simply bearing witness to his faith in the great “no matter what” of the grace of God we have in Jesus Christ:

Yes, we will suffer, yes, we will be discouraged, yes, we will suffer mental pain and anguish, and yes, some of us will endure lasting and chronic mental illness. But no matter what afflicts us, by the grace of God we can and will endure the living of these days. So we do not lose heart.

It is out of our Christian faith that the church addresses mental illness and offers God’s word to the mentally ill. There is an old saying that the purpose of the church is to “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” As the herald of God’s kingdom, the church is called to action on behalf of the mentally ill. To rattle the cage
of the complacent. As our bulletin insert says, the church responds to mental illness by *working to alleviate the stigma attached to serious mental illness* and serving as an advocate for the civil rights of the mentally ill.

The church also responds to mental illness whenever we, as a congregation, respond to those who are mentally ill - those deeply troubled persons who are just like ourselves, only more so. As the living body of Christ in the world, we can offer a safe and nurturing home for all of God’s children. Presbyterian writer Jay Centifanti bears witness to what we can do as a caring congregation when he writes, “The beginning of my journey back [from mental illness] was when people stopped treating me like I was disabled and incompetent and started treating me as though I was welcome at the table…”

I often hear, “I don’t know what to say to someone who is schizophrenic or has bipolar disorder or whatever”. And it can be hard to know what to say. But you don’t really need to say any more than “welcome” or “hello, how are you doing?” or “It’s great to see you!”

Sally was, as they say, “born and reared in the church”. She had always been there, singing, preparing a meal for a sick friend, teaching in the church school, serving on the session. Then one day, things just fell apart. It’s not really important why or how. It is enough to know that she couldn’t cope anymore, and was hospitalized in a town about 30 miles away.

That’s where Jim came into the story. Sally and Jim were lifelong friends. Not the closest of friends, perhaps, but friends all the same. And when Sally was hospitalized, Jim was thrown for a loop. He didn’t know what he could do or should do. He just knew he had to do something. So he went to see Sally in the hospital. The first time she would not see him, so he just left a note, “miss you”. On another trip she still wouldn’t see him, so he just wrote another note, “praying for you”. This went on for some time, Jim stopping by the hospital whenever he was nearby on business.

Then one day when he stopped by, Sally came out to see him. And they just talked. And Jim told Sally how things were going back at the church, and how much her friends missed her. Before long, Sally was home for a weekend, and she came to church, and with Jim’s encouragement, Sally greeted her old friends, who were delighted to see her. And before long, she was back, back home, back at work, back at church.

Now, maybe what Jim did had nothing to do with her recovery at all. And then again, maybe, just maybe, his words, his presence, his living of the good news, had everything in the world to do with her recovery!

**Friends:** do not lose heart. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.

**I Samuel 16:14-23**

Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him. 

15 And Saul’s servants said to him, “See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. 
16 Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.” 

17 So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me.” 

18 One of the young men answered, “I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the LORD is with him.” 

19 So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, “Send me your son David who is with the sheep.” 

20 Jesse took a donkey
loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul. 21 And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. 22 Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.” 23 And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
   a very present help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
   though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
3 though its waters roar and foam,
   though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
   the holy habitation of the Most High.
5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
   God will help it when the morning dawns.
6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
   he utters his voice, the earth melts.
7 The LORD of hosts is with us;
   the God of Jacob is our refuge.

8 Come, behold the works of the LORD;
   see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
   he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
   he burns the shields with fire.
10 “Be still, and know that I am God!
   I am exalted among the nations,
   I am exalted in the earth.”
11 The LORD of hosts is with us;
   the God of Jacob is our refuge.

2 Corinthians 4:7-11, 16

7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 9 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 10 For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. 11 So death is at work in us, but life in you.

13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—“I believed, and so I spoke”—we also believe, and so we speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. 15 Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.
So we do not lose heart

**Philippians 4:5-7**

The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.