

Dear Church, Stop Saying Violence Is a Mental Health Problem

Every time another tragic act of violence sweeps our country, major religious and political leaders love to toss around, "This is a mental health problem." The problem with statements like this? They're wrong.

Doctors, psychiatrists and researchers have repeatedly stated there's no evidence of a link between mental health medications and higher rates of violence. In fact, people with mental illnesses are more likely to be the victims of violent crimes than the perpetrators.

Not only is it tasteless and wrong to talk about mental illness after violent tragedies, it's also dangerous. When Christians do, they say to the 1 in 4 Americans struggling with mental health that the church doesn't care.

Maybe we want to believe church is a place where people are loved and welcomed unconditionally. We encourage newcomers to bring their most transparent selves. But when Christians make assumptions and draw false conclusions, they (we) communicate the opposite. In fact, what we communicate sounds more like:

"People with mental illness are dangerous."

"People with mental illness are to be blamed for violent crimes."

"We need to protect ourselves from people with mental illness."

If the Christian community has committed to loving one another and carrying each other's burdens, we must also educate ourselves about those burdens instead of casually using them

as scapegoats in national conversations.

Assumptions and false conclusions also write off entire groups of people. Jesus came to tear down barriers between people, but our language around mental illness does the opposite. Maybe it's easier to reconcile acts of terror when there's a group of people we can label as an "other," someone we don't understand, someone we can dehumanize. However, when we label people as "crazy," "evil" or "other" than ourselves, we create an "us vs. them" mentality that Jesus calls us combat with compassion and understanding.

Let's be clear on this: anything less than a compassionate and understanding response to hurting people is in direct opposition to the message of Jesus.

What's frustrating about the mythical connection some people are drawing between mental health and violence is that these lies hinder many people with mental illness from being honest about their struggles in faith communities. This is a problem, because we know people turn to their church communities and faith leaders for help. We also know that most church leaders aren't mental health professionals, so it's not realistic to expect them to know everything.

So, when we hear about violent tragedies, how should we respond? And what would a more compassionate, educated approach to the issue of mental illness be? The better question is, how can the church best serve hurting and stigmatized people?

The short, easy answer is to love people who don't think or look like us. To listen when we don't understand. To see the person in front of us as created in the image of God with purpose and inherent value. Those of us with mental illness don't expect our pastors to also serve as our psychiatrist or psychologist, but we'd love for you to take a step towards us with understanding and compassion.

We also need leaders in the church who are willing to use their platforms to speak up with a more gracious message. We need more leaders who approach the conversation similar to Jarrod Wilson and Rick and Kay Warren, who are bold with their love and have taken the time to learn about mental illness.

The truth is, there are many people in church with you every week who are faithful followers of Christ and who also have a mental illness. People with mental illnesses are singing in your choir, teaching Sunday School, keeping your children in the nursery, sitting in the pew next to you and even preaching from your pulpits.

People with mental illness are real people with needs and burdens, as well as gifts and talents and love to offer God and church community. Most of us aren't violent. Like you, we're just looking for a safe space to lay down our burdens and find rest for our souls.

The church is the perfect place to publicly talk about the realities of mental illness without stigmatizing assumptions or fearful hesitations. That's precisely why Christians should press in to be a source of light and love for every wounded heart. Mental health can be a messy and complicated topic, but that never stopped Jesus from approaching people with compassion and grace.

It shouldn't stop us either. {eo}

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