

The Day a Pastor Attempted Suicide

I've written extensively about the day I was supposed to die. I've told my story—the pastor who nearly died by suicide—countless times over the past several years. People are amazed, dumbfounded even, that a “man of God” could get so low that his desire for Jesus could only be equaled by his desire to end it all.

With National Suicide Prevention Day slated for Sunday, Sept. 10, I'm speaking up about my story once more.

People love to hear about the time Jesus showed up in that ICU room, during the days when I couldn't feel my legs. They weep when I share about how God whispered to my soul, “I'm not finished with you yet.” Everyone loves a good redemption story. But what I haven't talked much about is the day I started living again—the day I didn't die.

Maybe I haven't covered the day I started living again as concisely because it isn't really a day, but a series of days. There have been 1,814 of them, to be exact. The first seven days were the hardest. Choosing to get out of that hospital bed. To take my meds as prescribed. Not to overdose again. Not to escape again. Not to run away to the grave and hide until Judgment Day.

Each day, I have to make a conscious effort to tell the truth. To go to therapy. To confess my mess. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but the church doesn't handle long-term healing very well. We don't do a great job with chronic illness. We expect people to recover from a hospital stay within a matter of weeks, because that's what we're told faith is all about.

But the truth is, I have faith. It's gritty and comes with claws, but if I didn't have faith, I would have given a long

time ago. I have faith because I keep showing up, even when it isn't easy. I keep showing up in uncomfortable conversations with my wife. I keep showing up in frustrating admissions to my counselor. I keep showing up for my kids, and I keep showing up at work.

I keep showing up in my prayer life, even when it is painfully clear that my brain is broken.

I know we don't like to hear stories of when Jesus doesn't snap his fingers and heal everything in an instant. Those stories don't fit neatly into our boxes. We can't dress them up with bows and sell them at the local Christian bookstore. They aren't nearly as popular as mud on the eyes and dipping in the river seven times and seeing miracles. But as I continue to recover from my suicide attempt, I am learning that life isn't neatly boxed and bowed. If you live long enough, you see that life throws all sorts of pain and heartache our way. The best we can do is to cling tightly to the hem of the garment of the One who promised to never leave us or forsake us.

In case you think my story is rare, here are the stats: approximately 44,000 Americans die by suicide each year. And for each person that dies, 25 more attempt. According to The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, in 2015, 494,169 people visited a hospital for injuries due to self-harm.

The statistics show that my story is far from uncommon. Our old world is creaky and mean. We are exhausted, overworked and have a chronic lack of self-care. Those of us with mental illness often hide in the pews, for fear of being thought of as less-than a full Christian.

We are Christians, and we are in your churches. We don't need you to be our psychiatrist; hopefully, we already have one. We don't need you to try and fix us or even have all the answers. We don't really even need you to understand us, though we'd

love for you to try.

Our greatest desire is for the church to accept the fact that a brain can break, just like a bone. We need you to affirm that mental illness is a disease, just like cancer. It isn't a demon or a lack of faith or a curse. It's an illness. We need you to remind us that we aren't alone, and the best way to do that is to sit with us when we are sad or hurting or don't have any words at all.

Tell us to "come just as you are" and really mean it. Jesus welcomed people to come without production or pretense. So if you are seeking to create a community Jesus would be proud of, welcome everyone in their disease, dysfunction and exhaustion. Still looking for a miracle? Hear the voice of Jesus, reminding you He's not finished with you either. {eoa}

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