

Christ's Antidote to Depression
Matthew 11:28-30
July 9, 2023

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Dear Friends in Christ,

Several years ago, Nancy and I were terribly saddened and disturbed by the news that a friend and member of our former congregation had taken his own life. Alan was a successful farmer and over the years had built up a large farming operation in the community. But the pressures of a drought and the heavy responsibilities he carried as well as an ongoing struggle with depression was finally just too much for him to bear. A few years later, we received news that a young woman from our former congregation at Luseland had also taken her life. We were deeply saddened by these tragedies and are always concerned when depression leads people to consider self-destructive solutions, which are ultimately no solutions at all.

Probably most of us have felt depressed at one time or another. Things haven't gone as we had hoped, or we grow discouraged because of some setback in our health. We usually bounce back from such bouts of sadness when our circumstances improve. Sometimes, however, depression can be long-lasting, deep, gnawing, debilitating, and devastating to the person and his or her loved ones. It becomes a darkness that just won't go away and medical help is needed.

Today's sermon is focused on dealing with depression. Sometimes depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in our own bodies. This kind of depression is often treated effectively with medication, support, counseling, or another type of outside assistance.

Unfortunately, there are also times when depression is caused by forces outside of ourselves and our difficulty in dealing or coping with these forces. Medication may relieve the symptoms, but this kind of depression calls for help in dealing with the causes. Rather than internalizing or denying our feelings, or blaming ourselves and God for our feelings, by God's grace we are able to probe and pull the dark dragons out of our closets for the light of Jesus to shine on them. Other human resources may help, but ultimately Jesus Christ is the One who has the power to free us from depression and show us new meaning and purpose in our lives.

Have you ever seen the comic strip Hagar the Horrible? One day Hagar was trying to cheer up his depressed friend with these words: "Today the world dumped on you. Today the world humiliated and abused you, but remember, tomorrow is another day. His friend, taking those words to mean that there was more of the same in store for him tomorrow, simply falls down and sobs.

Charlie Brown also at times feels depressed. For a nickel, he goes for therapy to Lucy, from whom he expects support. But Lucy tells him he's a miserable human being and he **should** be depressed. So, he turns to Linus for support. He shares his frustrations: "I've just gotten a rejection slip from a

publisher". Linus is sympathetic and caring. So, he says, "Charlie Brown, that happens to a lot of manuscripts." "Yes," says the depressed Charlie Brown, "but I didn't submit any." Rejection. Humiliation. Despair.

The prophet Jeremiah experienced that. He had no friends. God had given Jeremiah the job to confront the people about their sins and to tell them that they would be punished. That calling took its toll on Jeremiah, so much so that Jeremiah cursed the day he was born. He didn't want to live anymore and face his continuous sorrow. Ultimately, Jeremiah blamed God for calling him to this depressing role in life. Two weeks ago we heard these words of Jeremiah in our Old Testament reading: "O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So, the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long."

Yet Jeremiah also felt the passion of God's message burning inside him. Through the power of the Holy Spirit he experienced the presence and power of God in his life and realized that those who mocked him would fail. In that hope and confidence Jeremiah praised God and sang glory to his name.

I wonder whether the apostle Paul may have suffered with some form of depression because of his "thorn in the flesh," whatever that might have been. He writes in 2 Corinthians, chapter 12: "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Rather than allowing his handicap to be a burden and even a cause for potential depression, he learned to view it as a gift from God.

The Gospel of Matthew records these inviting words of Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." What comfort and strength these words may be for a person who is struggling with prolonged depression!

The Good News of the Gospel is the ultimate response to depression. Depression is about us and our sad, angry, helpless, or hopeless feelings about ourselves and our lives. The Gospel is about Jesus, who frees us to be new people. People of hope.

Once Jesus told a parable about a merchant who had been looking for fine pearls. One day he discovered a pearl of great value. He immediately went and sold everything he has in order to buy that pearl. I believe that the merchant is Jesus, himself, who gave up everything — his eternal glory and majesty as the Son of God, the riches of heaven to become a human being, and then his very life — in order to purchase us from sin, death and the devil and bring us into his kingdom.

You are the pearl of great value for whom our Savior gave up everything to buy. But when you're depressed you don't think of yourself as a pearl, but maybe more like the ugly clam that hides the

pearl deep within its tightly closed shell. And when you're depressed you may believe that there is no pearl at all within you. But Jesus knows that there is. And he knows that it is so valuable that he would give up everything he has to make it his own possession.

Our value is not that we are such wonderful, loving and self-less people. We're not. In fact, we're more like the grain of sand that is inside every pearl. An ordinary grain of sand that is in fact an irritant to the clam and which is constantly being coated with the secretions that eventually turn it into a pearl. Our sins make us an irritant to God. They more than irritate him. They make us his enemy. But in Christ we are covered over with the blood he shed for us on the cross. We are "coated" — given a new coat of righteousness which Jesus won for us by his perfect life and innocent suffering and death. Your faith is the pearl of great value. Don't let depression or the problems of the world keep that pearl hidden within you.

Jesus Christ breaks the bonds of anything that would enslave us, including depression. Jesus gives us purpose for life; namely, to give him glory, to reflect his presence through lives of worship and service. He died on the cross and rose from the dead to give those who believe in him eternal life in heaven. Jesus changes our lives now and forever.

On the one hand, this all sounds so easy when, in fact, dealing with depression is not at all easy — at least from a human perspective. But that's precisely the point. What we cannot deal with easily — our fears, our sadness, our hopelessness — God has dealt with for us. We have a great and grace-filled God who is with us always, who has power to heal us and restore purpose and meaning and joy to our lives.

It's all about hope. The prophet Isaiah writes: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak...Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint". Indeed, no matter what physical or mental distress we have that might drag us down, including depression, we believe in Jesus and because of Jesus we can live in hope. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.