

“The Road Back to You: When Someone Takes His or Her Life”

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Well, it's so good to see you this morning and to continue this summer sermon series titled “The Road Back to You.” The idea behind this series is simple – Laura and I wanted to explore some of the most important issues that have to do with our spiritual and emotional well-being.

I know I want to be a healthier person, and I think you do too. I also think my faith in God is connected to all of it. And so I'm grateful to be together this morning to continue this series and address this challenging topic this morning.

I told someone this week that I was going to talk directly about suicide, and he said to me, “Well, you really know how to bring the crowds in, don't you?” I get it. And if it's a little heavy this morning, I apologize in advance.

Yet, if we could turn our congregation into a support group for a few minutes this morning, I feel certain that each of us could share a story. It might be about a parent. A cousin. A friend. A brother. Or maybe we think about a celebrity like Robin Williams who took his life a few years ago.

And then if we could get a little closer to the bone, I'm sure some of us here today have considered taking our own lives. Suicide has touched all of us in one way or another, and so I want to do my best to offer a few insights around the topic.

I think the best place for me to begin is with a true story . . . many years ago now I was serving as Senior Minister of University Christian Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and the Regional Minister at that time was Reverend Ralph Glenn.

Rev. Glenn was like a bishop or conference minister in the state of Texas. He was loved. He was respected. He was even a member of my church, and so most Sundays I would see him in our worship service. Ralph Glenn was one of the kindest, gentlest, & one of the sweetest human beings I have ever known.

But Ralph got into some trouble. There was some financial impropriety in his office. He made some mistakes. Serious mistakes. He was confronted by his finance committee. And then the executive committee. And then he lost his job on a Friday afternoon. The head of the executive committee called me and gave me a heads-up, because he knew Ralph would need some pastoral care.

I reached out to Ralph. I reached out to his wife. He never told his wife what happened at his office that afternoon. He was riddled with shame and embarrassment. A day or so later he went missing. He was missing for three days.

Police officers and friends and family members looked for him. It was a painful vigil. Most of us didn't sleep for several days. And then the call came from the police. Ralph Glenn – a man of faith, a

good person, loved by his children and wife, a person who had helped so many people over the course of his ministry – Ralph Glenn had parked his car in a desolate Texas place and in the loneliness and despair of that moment he took his own life.

That entire experience changed me. First and foremost, I came to believe that when a person reaches that place where they no longer want to live, that they have given up on themselves and life itself, that it is a place of despair hard for any of us to understand. But God understands. And in that darkest moment of life and death, my faith teaches me that no one – including Ralph Glenn – no one is alone.

The ancient psalmist declared: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God’s mercy never comes to an end.” I have limitations to what I can understand. And so do you. I have mercy to give the world, but there is a limit to my mercy. I’m human and so are you. But in that awful moment of human despair, God’s mercy continues flowing toward people. I believe this to be true.

There was a moment when Jesus was being crucified and he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus felt that. That experience was real to Jesus. And just as some of us have reached that kind of human pain, Jesus reached that moment of pain too.

But I also want to say that I think Jesus was wrong. He was right in terms of what he was feeling, but he was wrong in terms of theology, because in fact God never deserted Jesus. And I don’t think God deserted Ralph Glenn. And I don’t think God deserted Robin Williams.

In fact, when no one else can understand what we are feeling, what we are going through, God does understand, and God understands with mercy and love and compassion. I believe this to be true about God, because God is love and love is God, and nothing can hinder God’s love.

I also learned in that entire episode that we have a choice to make when someone takes his or her life. Of course we ask why. We should ask why. It’s natural to ask why. But sometimes we’ll never get an answer. Some explanations might be more helpful than others, but in the end we do not know.

Life is complex. Human beings are complex. Just think of the number of times you have been confused within yourself and about yourself. I can barely keep up with my own psyche, let alone keep up with what is going on in the psyche of someone else. We just don’t know. Yes, some people suffer from depression. And some people wrestle with a bi-polar condition. I understand that.

But even that doesn’t explain everything. Part of what it means to live with faith is living with the unknown, and suicide always brings us to an encounter with the unknown. How many times have each of us responded by saying: “I never saw it coming, I am shocked!” When it comes to suicide rarely is it simple causation . . . a to b to c to d. In a moment of despair, it’s often a to j or d to x. People of faith have to learn to live with unanswered questions, and that’s especially true when someone takes his or her life.

I also learned something else in that ordeal with Ralph Glenn . . . and it’s that one moment of suicide does not have to define the depth and breadth of a person’s life. I have a piece of my grandmother’s china. It’s a beautiful teacup. I love it. I cherish it. It has a large crack in it that I repaired years ago.

But you can still see the crack. And you can also see some of the crackling of the glaze inside the teacup. But just because it has some cracks in it, that doesn't mean I want to throw it away.

In fact, some of the cracks make me love it even more. Ralph Glenn had some broken places in his life, but he was still a beautiful man and a good man. Robin Williams had some deep flaws in his life, but that doesn't mean his life was worthless. What I'm trying to say is this: Don't let how a person ended his or her life, become the only way you remember that person.

We can bring mercy to one another while we live, but friends, and this is so important, sometimes we have to bring mercy to those who have left this world. We bring mercy to their memory. It doesn't mean we excuse their wrongs or shortcomings; it just means we look at their lives through a wide-angle lens.

I've come to see that people often take their own lives because they know they need to change their lives. They know it. They want it. But changing our lives is not easy. Have you tried to quit smoking? Have you tried to lose weight? Have you tried to beat an addiction? Have you tried to improve a relationship? It's not easy. And so a little compassion is always in order.

But sometimes I think people make the decision to commit suicide because they know they need to change something, but they don't know how to do it constructively, or they're just too tired or too confused to keep trying.

I can see alternatives . . . for you. That's why if you're struggling with a feeling of worthlessness or despair, reach out and talk to someone. And if I were in a moment of despair, and I've had my moments of feeling worthless, you would see alternatives for me. Yet for the person caught up in the tangle of his or her brokenness, seeing a pathway forward is almost impossible.

Every now and then people say, "A person who commits suicide is selfish." I think that pronouncement is way too harsh. I have a friend whose sixteen-year old son took his life a few years ago. He wasn't being selfish. He wanted to change his life and he didn't know how to do it. He was confused to the point of despair.

I could have helped him see alternatives. His parents could have helped him see alternatives. His friends could have helped him see alternatives. But in the end he could not see them for himself. And so he did the only thing he knew to do in that moment. But selfishness was not the driving force; the driving force was a lack of imagination to see alternatives for his young life. And frankly, what good does it do to label someone's suicide as a moral failure?

Some theologians have tried to understand it in this way: That suicide is murder. If a person murders himself or herself, then that is a sin, but because the person is dead, he or she cannot repent of their sins and receive God's forgiveness, therefore, de facto, suicide is the unpardonable sin. Have you heard that reasoning? I have.

My housekeeper, Sandra, is such a sweet lady. Her nephew took his own life a month or so ago. She told me about it. I don't know many of the details, but I talked to her for an hour a few weeks ago, and she was beside herself because she believed – because of her religion – that her nephew would be

punished in hell because he had committed the “unpardonable” sin. I tried to tell her that surely God, who knows more and feels more than all of us put together, surely God can welcome her nephew home into everlasting love, because God knew and felt her nephew’s anguish.

Friends, there’s no such thing as the unpardonable sin! According to Jesus, the only sin that cannot be forgiven is rejecting forgiveness all together. And by that way, that was Jesus being ironic, because he understood that God’s mercy is new every single morning for every single one of us.

I know this sermon is running long and I’m sorry about that, but I want to say one more thing today . . . when someone takes his or her life, we often wind up blaming ourselves. More than asking why, we begin to beat ourselves up emotionally. “If only I had called more. If only I had stayed in touch more. If only I had noticed the change of behavior.” If. If. If.

But I can tell you from experience after experience that if a person decides he or she is going to take their life, then there is really nothing you can do to stop it. You can care. You can love. You can support. You can beg and plead and push . . . but people are free . . . and our freedom makes life worth living, because with that freedom we can love one another, but that freedom also brings us to our knees, because with that freedom we can decide to harm ourselves.

In other words, if you’ve had a friend or family member commit suicide, be gentle with yourself. Be gentle with yourself. I’m not sure how to wrap all of this up this morning, but let me try . . . I do believe that life is sacred. And life is good. It’s sacred for the very young. It’s sacred for the very old. And it’s sacred for everyone in between.

There’s a difference between trying to understand suicide and giving permission for suicide. I think we need to understand drug abuse, but that doesn’t mean I’m giving permission to use drugs. I want to understand suicide. I want to understand it because it happens. It’s real. It touches all of our lives.

But please, this morning, if you are here today and you are feeling like you are at the end of your rope, or that you are thinking of harming yourself, or you are still struggling over a friend’s suicide, please reach out and get some help. There are always alternatives.

Life can be better. God and this church and your minister – we want you around. You are important to us. Life can be good again. And there’s a way to change your life without taking your life. Now, I know I’ve not even addressed physician-assisted suicide. That’s a whole other sermon. But I’m saying today . . . we want you around.

Friends, I mean it with my whole heart this morning . . . I love you all . . . let’s love one another. Let’s pay attention to one another. And may God forever bless the memory of my dear friend Ralph Glenn.

Amen.