**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**May 29th, 2022**

**Lead with a Limp**

1. My Junior Year

In my Junior year of High School, I started dating a boy

from a private school in a neighboring town. His friends soon became my friends and as it turns out, his schoolmate Jesse would later become my college roommate.

 Jesse and I knew each other in the realm of group hangouts and I knew something was going on during Senior year, but we weren’t close enough at the time for me to feel like I could ask. I soon found out the story when we became roommates.

 Jesse belonged to a megachurch where her whole family attended. Her mother struggled with mental health, and while I can’t remember her diagnosis, it was significant enough for her to be on medication. One Sunday morning, a preacher of this big megachurch came to the pulpit and shared that if you believe in Jesus, you should stop taking all your medication. Jesus shall heal you.

 Jesse’s mom listened to the preacher and that day, she threw out all her medications, cold turkey, believing faithfully that Jesus would heal her. The outcome would not surprise you when I tell you that her mother later in the week, effected by the terrors of detox, ended up in a hotel and tried to take her life. In a miraculous moment, she reached out and dialed 911 and when she was in the hospital, she was told that she shouldn’t have survived, but thank God, she made it.

 Jesse’s mother didn’t get to see her go off to Senior prom, she didn’t get to see her graduation, and Jesse was rightfully angry at the church. I’m glad to say that Jesse’s mother is well now, she no longer attends that church, and she is a proud mother and grandmother. In the years that have passed, I’m glad she didn’t miss the wonders that happened around her.

1. Pastoral Responsibility

 I saw Jesse’s pain and as I reckoned with my own call to ministry, I had to wonder if institutional ministry was where I was called. I recognized how far a pastor’s influence and power went and how that power could and can be abused.

 This experience was formative, alongside others, and it crafted the leader I became and I am becoming. This last week, at the Festival of Homiletics, Rev. Amy Butler shared this poignant note that speaks to the leader I seek to be, as she said, “My dad is a native Hawaiian and activist and community organizer and has spent his whole life working to building and leading efforts to change the broken systems that destroy indigenous communities. He always tells me, “Amy, you’ve gotta lead with a limp. Your people need to see the real you, the you that is injured, that hurts, the you that needs help and makes mistakes. The you that is real. Always lead with a limp.”

 So, I lead with a limp. Yes, an actual, physical limp, but a knowledge of the mental health struggles I have seen in my own life. I am a person who is one of God’s beloved. I am also a person in the same breath that struggles at times with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and an eating disorder. My serotonin isn’t only created in my brain, but I take medication to supplement that which my brain cannot naturally make. One of the most helpful things I’ve been told was by my mom who shared with me when I started to take medication was this – you wouldn’t deny a diabetic their insulin, so why would you deny a person who needs medicine for something their brain needs. So I’m your pastor, and I’m also deeply human. And again, I am a beloved child of God.

 I give thanks to God for medication, for science, for brilliant minds in laboratories making lives better. I also know I’m not alone – I’ve heard your stories, I’ve seen your struggle, and while we can often name aloud the physical pain we see during prayer, it can be so much harder to name the emotional and spiritual pain we feel inside.

1. Mental Health and Ministry

I also give thanks to God for the Word and those words that give

me great comfort that I have shared in our readings today. We often hear these verses from Romans at a funeral, but they are life-giving in the here and now. There’s something beautiful about acknowledging that no powers, no depression, no anxiety, no doubts about my body, no highs, no lows, no anything – nothing, nothing in the world can ever take us away from God’s love. That’s a Word that is liberating. When you have your moments, and you will, remember that the God of us all cannot be undone by anything here on Earth.

 In our first reading from Isaiah, there’s so much good news that it’s hard to unravel it briefly. I hope you take this Word and read it a few times over today or this week, and feel the power that it holds for you. For me, it reminds me that I do not have to consider the things of old but that each and every day God is creating us anew. What defined us before does not define us today. Another liberating Word for a people whose hearts need healing.

1. Mental Health Ministry

The reason I have preached on mental health today is because

we are closing on Mental Health Awareness Month. It also afforded me the opportunity to share a plea with you as you go out into the world. This place is called a sanctuary, and it’s not only a physical sanctuary, but one for the mind and heart. We, as the people of Christ, need to help in destigmatizing the weight of mental illness in our community and in our world.

 The church has often been quiet on the topic, but today I ask that we do not remain silent. Historically, we have used the Bible to create harm to those who suffer, like when folks in Scripture claimed that it was a demon taking over the body when in reality it was a mental health crisis or epilepsy or something we now understand. They didn’t know better, they didn’t know the science – but we do, and we can do better. We must do better. We need to be the church that is not afraid to name mental health struggles, but to say them aloud, to say them with strength, because if you can’t be yourself here, then we aren’t being the church we claim to be.

 The question becomes – how do we become the church we need to be. Last week, as we heard from our youth, one shared in front of us all that she struggled with mental health and that experience has led her to work to help others. To say that aloud, to name it, is an act of bravery and strength and it shows the work that she has done to help heal her soul.

 I encourage that bravery of naming – I encourage it in a safe place, like this sanctuary, or among family and friends who will hold you in a safe space. I encourage you to say it aloud. I encourage you to go to therapy, even if you think you are doing OK, because we’ve been walking through traumatic times and just like a physical check-up sometimes you need a mental health check-up too. I encourage you to create good coping skills and a safety plan, because having those in place creates a healthier life.

 Go out into this world, knowing that God loves us all deeply and longs for us to live a wholehearted and full life – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. May you have strength to say the things that need said, the courage to listen when someone needs to share their story, and the knowledge that no matter where you are on a health journey, that you are a beloved child of God, loved beyond our own understanding. Amen.