

OVERHEARD AT STARBUCKS
What About Suicide?

Jeremiah 20:14-18; Romans 8:35-39

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I have to confess. Today's sermon title might be a stretch. While the other topics in this sermon series may be discussed often at Starbucks (or Coffee Zone or wherever), suicide is probably not. In fact, that's the problem. We're not talking about it in our churches, schools and families. And it needs to be discussed. John Hewett calls suicide a "singular act with a plural effect" [*After Suicide*, p. 51]. By the way, John's book is in our church library and unfortunately, has been needed and checked out many times over the years.

This next part of my sermon is grim, but we must look at some suicide statistics. Since 1999, more Americans have killed themselves than in the previous year. The highest increase in suicides in the U.S. is in the age range 45-64, up 30%. Look at some global facts: ***In 2010, worldwide deaths have been tallied thus: SUICIDE 883,715; WAR 17,670; NATURAL DISASTERS 196,018; MURDERS 456,268 [Institute for Health Metrics, Global Burden of Disease, published by Lancet].***

One thing is for sure. If we're going to help others, suicide must be de-stigmatized in our churches and in our culture. As someone has pointed out, suicide is one of the few killers that does not inspire 5K runs and celebrity benefits. So here's a thought. Why don't we as followers of Jesus get out of the judging business regarding suicide? And why don't we avoid the empty platitudes and pious phrases when someone experiences this kind of loss? We cannot pretend nor assume to understand the depth of another person's suffering. Only God knows a human heart.

For example, Jeremiah was extremely sensitive, reflective and (we would say today) he seemed to struggle with depression. He was known as the Weeping Prophet. LET'S READ HIS WORDS...JEREMIAH 20:14-18. In the ancient East, when a baby was born, the messenger who brought the good news was usually given a reward (like tipping the wait staff). Instead, Jeremiah says, let that messenger be cursed. He dared to put into words the dark night he was experiencing.

We don't have time to discuss all the contributing factors that could trigger one to harm him/herself. I am not a trained therapist or an expert. There is no simple cause and effect formula related to suicide. But one Christian author who herself has battled mental illness wrote, "Suicide is the choice born of unbearable pain" [Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion*, p. 48]. Without oversimplifying, it is safe to report that research shows a desire to die begins with excruciating loneliness, lack of connection and inclusion. Real or

perceived loneliness...the genesis of the wish to die. Experts discuss the lifesaving power of relationships, of belonging [*Newsweek*, May 22, 2013].

But now, the big question that people ask about suicide. Can one who completes suicide go to heaven? Are they condemned to hell? There are seven suicides mentioned in the Bible (Judges 9:54; 16:29-31; 1 Sam. 31:3-6; 2 Sam. 17:23; 1 Kings 16:18; Matt. 27:5). Nothing is said about the eternal status of these people. If you want to argue that Judas was called the "son of perdition" (John 17:12), you could make the case that he was called that because of what he did in life, not what he did in death.

Is suicide the answer? No. Is it God's will? No. Should we do all to stop it? Yes. To find other ways, to look for hope, a reason to go on. Baby steps: look forward to reading the morning paper tomorrow, that cup of coffee; make it through the day until you can visit with a friend. Find some way to hang on until you feel better! Certainly, suicide is not the answer. But, does God forgive suicide? Of course. Those who teach that persons who take their own lives are in hell do so on the basis that their sin cannot be forgiven. But other people die suddenly in car accidents, by heart attacks, etc. We never talk about them being in hell because they could not get their sin confession updated at the last minute. And who of us knows for sure if we have forgotten to confess some sin--lying, lust, swearing, etc.? You see, when we are saved, it is eternal. We are forgiven not just for past sins, but for past present and future sins. If we were only saved for past sins, why call it salvation? Why not call temporary relief or probation? ("For God so loved the world...may have *temporary relief? Probation?*").

Do you believe the Bible? Romans 8 says NOTHING separates us from God's love. Nothing. In v. 35, the word "distress" is the Greek word from which we get our word "stenosis," the crowding or cramping of the spine. It means to confine, constrict, to be in distress or anguish. That may well describe the person who contemplates ending life. Nothing can negate the work of Christ for us.

I was writing a letter recently to someone who was worried about a loved one who had completed suicide. Let me share with you a part of what I said. "God is not angry with your loved one. God is weeping. God loves that person more than you do. If you grieve, think how God must grieve." I love this quote: "Jesus did not come to remove suffering or to explain it away. He came to fill it with His presence" [Paul Claudel, quoted in *Darkness Is My Only Companion*, p. 36].

And then, this blessing from Catholic priest and author John O'Donohue, a blessing for those who have lost loved ones to suicide: *And may your lost loved one/Enter into the beauty of eternal tranquility,/In that place where there is no more sorrow/Or separation or mourning or tears.*

[John O'Donohue, *Benedictus*, p. 176]