

I will ask for forgiveness today. There won't be any charming stories or funny jokes. The topic we are tackling today is far too serious to diminish it with jokes and funny stories.

It was early June 2019. I knew I was headed to Show Low for my first appointment at White Mountain UMC. I knew I needed to complete licensing school before I arrived there so I could administer communion on my very first Sunday. The only school that really worked for me was in the West Ohio conference in mid-July. I registered and ordered all the materials I would need.

The preparation involved reading over 2000 pages and writing 9 papers, including a sermon. All of this was due by June 19<sup>th</sup>. Did I mention that I also needed to get a house ready to sell and continue to work my more than 40 hour a week job at Intuit? Psst...I got'r done.

Looking through all of the books I needed to read, one stood out. It was written by a man named Fe Anam Avis. An unusual name, and a title that grabbed my attention. "A Second Day: A Hopeful Journey Out of Suicidal Thinking." Whoa...that weighed on me. It struck me. Of course, as a pastor, I could face this issue.

The book followed the story of someone who attempted suicide. The title of the book a second day refers to the day after someone has either not gone through or is unsuccessful with committing suicide.

In licensing school an entire 4 hour session was devoted to discussing the book and suicide. One of the questions they asked was, "What are you going to do about it?" I knew at some point I wanted to find the courage to give a sermon about suicide during suicide awareness week. That day is today.

But it begs the question. Why should we as a church family care about the topic of suicide? Because it is perhaps the most misunderstood form of death we encounter. Because it is one of the top 10 causes of death in the United States. Just last year the number of suicide related

deaths in the US surpassed 50,000. Let's look at some of the local facts from a study the Arizona Health Department conducted on suicides from 2011 to 2021.

The number of suicide deaths has increased every year. Men were more likely to commit suicide than women.

In Arizona, the suicide mortality rate in 2021 was 5 points higher per 100,000 than the national rate. Men were 4 ½ times more likely to commit suicide than women. The largest increases in suicide rates were among adults ages 25-34 and 65-74. Only 2 ages groups showed a decline in suicide rates, 55-64 and 75 or older. At 59.7 %, suicide death by a firearm was overwhelmingly the number one method. By 66.3%, the number one place to commit suicide? The home.

By county, Apache County ranks highest with a suicide rate of 65.1 deaths per 100,000. Where does Mohave County stand? 32 deaths per 100,000. 5<sup>th</sup> highest in the state. From an ethnic standpoint, Native Americans were the number one ethnic group, with white non-hispanics coming in second. Number one method of suicide by these ethnic groups? Native Americans chose hanging by 66.4% and non-hispanic whites chose firearms by 57.8%.

These are sobering statistics. Did you notice something? This isn't a problem in someone else's neighborhood. Just look at the numbers for Mohave county. We haven't even touched on the fact that a suicide death's impact isn't just measured in numbers about age, method, and location, it is also measured in YPLL. Years per life lost.

I don't know about you, but when I was growing up, I was taught that suicide was the unforgiveable sin. There was no question of where that person was going. Oddly, as I have read my bible over and over again, I don't see any area that confirms this to be true. So then what are we to believe about suicide?

How do we approach any other type of death? Cancer, heart attack, stroke. Those who succumb to these deaths are honored. But for many families who lose a loved one to suicide, think about how they are almost relegated to remember that person. Airs of hush, unhealthy quiet, unclean grief permeate even suffocate the air of a memorial service.

For far too long, churches have allowed suicide to be misunderstood. Back in Sahuarita a friend at Santa Cruz UMC had to experience the unthinkable when his son became part of the statistical data for suicides that year. At that time, he posted an article that outlined the most beautiful and I believe healthy way to look at suicide. Here are 5 points made by Ron Rolheiser, a priest in the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

First, in most cases, suicide is the result of a disease, a sickness, an illness, a tragic breakdown within the emotional immune system.

Next, For most suicides, the person dies, as the does the victim of any terminal illness or fatal accident, not by his or her own choice. When people die from heart attacks, strokes, cancer, and accidents, they die against their will. Don't you think the same is true in suicide?

Third, We should not worry about the eternity of a suicide victim, believing that suicide is the ultimate act of despair. God's hands are infinitely more understanding and gentler than our own. God's understanding and compassion exceeds our own.

Fourth, We should not second-guess ourselves when we lose a loved one to suicide: What might we have done? Where did we let this person down? What if? If only we'd been there at the right time! Church family, rarely would this have made a difference. Most of the time, we weren't there for this very reason. The suicidal person did not want us to be there. He or she picked the moment, the spot, and the means precisely so we wouldn't be there. Now this isn't an excuse for insensitivity, merely a healthy check against false guilt and fruitless second-guessing.

Finally, we must help the loved ones who remain here, to redeem the memory of those who die by suicide. This method of death should not be a false prism by which we see their lives. A good person is a good person. A sad death does not change that.

You know, that sounds an awful lot like what Paul said to the church in Rome in our passage today. Look at the question Paul asks in chapter 8 vs 35. “What Can Separate us from the Love of Christ?” It’s not a rhetorical question. Paul answers it in vs 38 & 39. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So let me ask again. What can separate anyone from the love of Christ?

How do we as United Methodists look at suicide? Here are some thoughts from our revised social principles from GC 2020.

“Our conviction that life is a sacred gift, along with persistent questions and concerns about potential abuse, lead us as a church to oppose both euthanasia and suicide while continuing our ministries of mercy with families who are affected by such actions... We believe that suicide does not bar people from God’s grace, which is all-sufficient. We urge pastors and local congregations to establish appropriate protocols in responding to people considering suicide and the survivors of suicide attempts... Rather than ostracizing or condemning survivors or family members affected by suicide, we urge pastors and congregations to provide compassion and support to these people.”

We’ve looked at data, we’ve reframed what suicide is, we’ve looked at scripture, we’ve looked briefly at our United Methodist view of suicide. What is left? How about some ways to expand suicide awareness. Let’s start by looking at a video of a Golden Gate Bridge jump survivor.

VIDEO HERE

With that, let's talk about some warning signs. People considering suicide talk about or make plans for suicide. They may act anxious and agitated. They may talk about being a burden, about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain. They may increase their use of alcohol or drugs. They might sleep too little or too much. You might find them withdrawing or feeling isolated.

Is there such a thing as effective suicide prevention? Church family, make no mistake, we are a first line of defense for people who are facing life struggles. They come to a church looking to find hope, meaning, and purpose. They come knowing that what they've been trying isn't sustainable. A church seems to offer sustainable measures of hope, meaning, and purpose.

Can we do this? Can we commit to being a sustainable measure of hope, meaning, and purpose. Can we be an important part of effective suicide prevention? I believe we can. I believe it is our mandate. If this is speaking to you and you'd like to help create an effective suicide prevention program at St. Johns, let's talk.

I pray we might be able to show anyone, anywhere who is considering suicide that there's never been a moment when they weren't held by the loving arms of God. (Second service), God is able to keep what's been committed, that includes them.