

Message: God's Love Heals**Is your heart broken?**

God's is. We gather together on the Sabbath, seeking rest in the Lord. Yet our minds were filled this week with images of lives lost and families shattered, after the tragedy in Nice, France. Jesus wept at the senseless, brutal act committed by the young Tunisian man. Once again, we wrestle with the purpose and meaning of this loss of life, particularly the children and teens killed and injured. The images brought tears to our eyes and sadness to our hearts. This isn't an easy time for anyone. There are no easy answers. We need to go to God in prayer, reflect on God's Word and support our overseas neighbors. Today, we're going to look at how God equips us to deal with the struggles and challenges of life by giving us hope and leading us to a community of faith.

The facts are confusing about the Bastille Day attack. We may never understand the young man's motivation. One thing does strike me. It's the personal circumstances of the attacker. His neighbors described him as being quiet, someone who preferred to be alone, a person who didn't respond to greetings. He was separated from his wife and three young children, and his family lived in Tunisia. He wasn't particularly religious and may have been off of medication while abusing alcohol.

This reminds me of the profiles of those who attacked innocents at Sandy Hook, Charleston and Columbine. They were estranged from their families and their community. Unfortunately, they felt their only recourse was to do violence to those who couldn't defend themselves in familiar, nearby settings. Psalm 36 teaches us about God's steadfast love in the face of the wicked things people plan and do. Only in God can we find the source of light and life, even during dark times.

Lonely, isolated, anti-social – these are terms related to shame and guilt in many cultures, east and west. These words describe the way of life of many people around the world. With so many growing up in broken homes, between households, struggling on social media and addicted to the internet, we're losing our connection to other people. We're losing social skills. We're hungry for deeper connections and spirituality, but we feel powerless to have real impact in the world. That's the description of a life half-lived, a life in darkness.

There are other ways to live. Nick Vujicic, the author of *Life Without Limits*, has no limbs. He was born with no arms or legs, yet he lives a full life. Nick travels around the world giving inspirational talks about how God works in and through his life. Nick says, “The challenges in our lives are there to strengthen our convictions. They are not there to run us over.”¹ Nick is a man who is full of conviction, energy and hope, even in the middle of circumstances that would challenge even the strongest of us. He embraces God’s love. It gives him hope each day.

Christian author Dutch Sheets writes, “When life doesn’t turn out as we hoped it would, it’s easy to let negative attitudes dominate our thoughts. When faced with discouragement, confusion, unbelief, bitterness and cynicism, many times we tend to run ahead of God to try to change the situation, or worse yet, run completely away from God.”²

Dutch shares a story about open heart surgery. The medical team couldn’t restart the patient’s heart after the procedure. “After exhausting all efforts, the doctor leaned into the unconscious patient’s ear and said, ‘We need your help. We can’t get your heart restarted. Tell your heart to start beating.’ Instantly, the patient’s heart started beating. That’s what we have to do when we delay hope or turn away from God. To kickstart our restoration, we have to tell our spiritual heart we’re going to begin again. ‘There’s a time to grieve and there’s a time to hope,’ says Dutch. ‘We need to get delayed hope under control.’”³ The good news is that the restart process may be as simple as reminding ourselves Jesus loves us.

Hope isn’t blind. Before we can offer others hope, we need to spend time understanding their situation and circumstances. We need to understand the pain of loneliness, how those who are marginalized by our society are suffering and the loss of self-esteem that leads to isolation. It isn’t hard to find, if we’re willing to look.

We’re blessed and we know it. You can see it in family and church photos. They’re images of good times, when we’re with friends and loved ones. If you were coming from the outside and looking at our

¹ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3395320.Nick_Vujicic

² <http://www1.cbn.com/dutch-sheets-power-hope>

³ *Ibid*

photo albums, you'd say we're perfect, healthy and happy. And, in many ways, that would be accurate. But pictures don't tell the whole story, do they? Behind the smiles, there are things that aren't right; things rarely, if ever, spoken about. You know the kinds of things I'm talking about. It's the things that isolate us, making us feel like we aren't welcome, like everyone is talking about us and no one cares.

For example, some of us and some of our family members, may overindulge in alcohol, prescription drugs or other substances. We know how the language goes, “So and so is ‘resting’ or ‘isn't good in the morning’” We couch treatments with words like “spa” or “time at a center,” with the implication that it's a retreat. The reality is that could be anything from a treatment center to a psychiatric hospital. I'm not judging anyone – alcoholism runs in my family. But, if we never speak about our experiences and problems, then we're putting a distance between ourselves and those who are close to us, those who are most likely to care about, and for, us.

These are well-kept secrets. There may be people who can help, but we would never dream of asking for help to understand what's wrong. We might not know what to say, for one thing. We wouldn't know the words, only that something wasn't right. And so we're stuck, with something that's too scary to talk about. 1 Peter 5:7 tells us, “*Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.*” It's good advice, but it's seldom easy to follow. Fear is a powerful motivator, but God's love is not hindered. Psalm 139:12 tells us, “*even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*”

Some of us may be dealing with other kinds of difficulties. Without a doubt, there are people who are dealing with other kinds of addictions. That includes sexual addictions – pornography being the most prevalent, but infidelity is possible. Gambling or excessive risk-taking is another example of a problem we want to keep secret. There are many addictive behaviors which can lead to dysfunctions in relationships, broken families and other problems. Those who are struggling learn early on how to deflect others to the symptoms, hiding the root cause from others and even from themselves. Proverbs 13:12 teaches, “*Hope [delayed] makes the heart sick.*”

Some of us may be dealing with deeper, more challenging difficulties. For example, debilitating illness scares people. We speak about common illnesses, such as cancer, diabetes or other challenges, particularly if we’re helping with care, treatment or funds. Some illnesses seem to be more “socially acceptable” than others. But a conversation about HIV/AIDS, PTSD or colonoscopies is scary. It puts people off. One sentiment shared by those who are ill: “I am not my disease.”⁴ Sadly, limited physical abilities, challenges or differences are also put into the category of those things we can’t talk about. And yet, by not doing so, we inhibit the ability of those who live with such challenges to speak to us and to be open about their needs and struggles.

Another example of a class of illness we seldom speak about is mental illness. The words are scary: schizophrenic, depressive, bipolar, and others. Shelia Walsh, a Christian writer and personality, says this: “If you have a mental illness, people often say, ‘If you’re a believer, you can do all things through Christ that strengthens you.’ That follows the line of reasoning that says ‘you’re ill because you lack the faith you need to get well.’ You wouldn’t say that to a child who fell off a swing and broke a leg. You wouldn’t say, ‘Get up and walk, because you can do all things through Christ.’”⁵

The most courageous, faithful step we can take is the first, because that’s when we’re at our most vulnerable. Romans 5:6 reminds us of the depth of God’s love, “*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*” We reject God under the premise that we’re in control, when, in reality, we’re often out of control or else we never had control in the first place. In spite of our rejection, God proves his love for us in Christ on the cross, an ongoing act of reconciliation. That’s the greatest act of love possible.

When we speak about those things that marginalize and isolate us, God helps us in several ways. First, we fully accept the love of God. There are a lot of people who look at challenging situations and come away with two questions: What does it take to please God? What else do

⁴ <https://www.guidепosts.org/inspirational-stories/inspirational-story-glenn-close-campaigns-hope-and-mental-illness/page/0/1>

⁵ <https://www.guidепosts.org/health-well-being-comfort-hope/how-god-loved-sheila-walsh-back-to-life>

I need to do? This views our relationship with God as a to-do list, filled with tasks, rules and obligations, rather than hope. That view steals the joy from life. It emphasizes performance, shame and guilt, which are isolating, rather than acceptance, dignity and trust, which build community. Pastor Nigel Mumford says it this way, “So often in our prayers we don’t think big enough, dream big enough or ask big enough. God wants more for us than we often imagine.”⁶ Jesus said, “*Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive*” (Matthew 21:22). Let us be courageous and bold, trusting God to give us visions of life in community beyond our expectation.

Second, we learn from each other when we share our needs and experiences. There’s an interesting thing about terms like bipolar and depression or other language, like racism and prejudice. The more we use the terms, the less power they have over us. Talking openly and lovingly with others about our challenges, limitations or addictions helps remove the stigma from the problem. Talking openly with others, sharing our daily struggles and hopes, helps everyone because God gives us the opportunity to come together as a community.

Third, it builds a community based on trust. That’s not the same as looking and acting like our Sunday photos, which is superficial. Being part of a community based on trust means we trust each other because we trust the one who brought us to the group. That’s the person we first have a relationship with, our primary relationship. When we’re part of a community of trust, based on a relationship in Jesus Christ, we’re in a community that heals wounds, calms anxieties and chases away fears.

Being a part of a community based on trust has a few requirements. To truly be part of a community of trust, you can’t be anonymous. We’re called to help each other by walking through messy situations and sitting with others who are in pain or suffering. You can’t do that anonymously. Also, it isn’t easy. Culturally, it’s difficult. We’re battling generational teaching and instruction in “hide and don’t seek.” Even non-Christians know that. But there are great benefits. As singer-songwriter Carly Simon said, “Hiding pain requires an enormous amount of energy; sharing it is liberating.”

⁶ <https://www.guideposts.org/blog/is-your-dream-big-enough>

One of the good things about a community of trust is the way accountability works. Rather than penalizing or kicking someone out who breaks the rules, which is what happens in performance-based communities, in a community of trust the response is different. When we fall back into bad habits and behaviors, others ask, "How can we help you get back on your feet? What kind of support do you need?" That's very different. It shows respect and offers dignity.

There's a story about a young woman named Robin in Christianity Today. "During high school she was enrolled in an honors English class. The first day of class the teacher talked about expectations and handed out an overview of what they'd be studying. Robin was completely overwhelmed. She came home and told her father he *had* to go talk with the teacher to get her out of the class. He agreed to set up a conference during which he and the teacher struck an agreement. The teacher wanted Robin to remain in the class, so she offered to give her an 'A' from the very beginning, with the understanding Robin would still do the work and participate in class discussion. Robin agreed to the arrangement. Do you know what the teacher found? Robin turned in 'A' work anyway. The teacher removed the threat of failure, and in its absence, Robin excelled."⁷

Feelings of desperation, isolation and loneliness may be the result of our fear of failure. Like Robin, we may panic when we think of all the work the Christian life seems to demand. How could we ever make a passing grade? Thankfully, God has already given us an "A" through Christ. We find a freedom we didn't know before. Understanding that we don't have to work for God's approval won't made us stop reading the Bible or praying. It actually gives us a passion for it. The more we learn about God's love for us, the more motivated we are to return God's love by sharing it with others. That does two things: it gives us hope and it invites us into a community of trust, based on faith.

There are two extremes to be careful about. There are the days when we look at the list of things we haven't done and we find ourselves drowning in guilt. On the flip side, there are days when we look at the

⁷ Amber Penney, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/defendingyourfaith/whats-it-take-how-to-please-god.html?start=2>

list of what we have done and feel like we've got it all together. When we reach either of these extremes, we need to keep in mind that we've forgotten about God's grace. We need to remind ourselves our relationship with God isn't based on our ability to do the right things. We're a new creation because of what Jesus has done for us out of love. Jesus took away the ultimate threat of failure, which is death. So we can relax and spend our time getting to know God and helping others in their relationship to God and one another. And that's the hope we can offer to others when the world seems crazy. Through God's grace, we have the power to heal a world that is suffering: isolated, alone and afraid. To God be the glory!

Let us pray:

Lord, help us to trust you, each and every day. Give us the boldness to speak in your name, to offer your love to a world that is hurting and in need of hope. Help us to follow you and be transformed by your love so we may bless others with that same love. Bless us when we live generously, sharing your love with others. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

Psalm 36:5-9 (NRSV)

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O LORD. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life, in your light we see light.

Romans 5:6-11 (NRSV)

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.