

Practice good works

Exodus 32:14 The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people

Every year October 10 is commemorated as World Mental Health Day. A World Health Organization (WHO) led observation, this year the theme is **Mental Health for all: Greater investment – Greater Access**. This theme suggests mentally ill persons are experts by experience and one way to shape intervention is to listen to their voices and take their recommendations seriously. This view is supported by WHO director-general Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus who says “Nobody should be denied access to mental health care because she or he is poor or lives in a remote place.”¹ In response to this injunction I invite us to reflect on the theme Practice good works.

This call to practice good works is against the background of the age old saying ‘delay is danger.’ It applies both to the urgency required for mental health interventions and is one way to think about the first reading from Exodus 31:1-14.

According to the writer of the book of Exodus “when the people saw that Moses

¹ <https://www.firstpost.com/health/world-mental-health-day-theme-for-2020-focuses-on-increasing-investment-on-psycho-social-support-amid-pandemic-8898581.html>

delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us...” The message here is that nature abhors a vacuum and so do people. This begs the question, were the people of Israel mentally ill to the extent that they turned to an idol in the absence of Moses? Or, does this turning to an idol point to a greater need for people to feel a sense of assurance in the absence of leadership? The answer to the first question resides in the rejection of God by the people and the answer to the second relates to the role of leadership in times of stress. Moses’ delay on the mountain showed the rejection of God by the Israelites yet his leadership led him to practice good works by defending a rebellious people.

Another way to understand the rebellion is to take a deeper look at the Hebrew word for delay which is “to postpone or retard.” This definition sheds light on the focus on mental health. “Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” What do we do when something is postponed or retarded? COVID-19 is one way things get postponed or retarded? What do we do in these times? We have a choice. Our theme for today is practice good works. It is a call to put

into perspective ways in which we either reject or embrace the ways of God. We can reject God or turn to God for leadership, guidance and support. As a state of well being, mental health points to our innate or God-given abilities to make the best of the realities which confront us at this time of COVID-19.

Karla Suomala, who describes herself as an Independent Scholar of Richmond, Calif. says of the text from Exodus.

“Exodus 32 has two different scenes playing out simultaneously: in one, Moses (leader) is at the top of Mount Sinai where he is just about to conclude a period of forty days and forty nights which he has spent receiving instructions from God; and in the other, the Israelites are at the base of the mountain becoming restless, having begun to doubt that Moses will ever return.”²

In the midst of this environment of restlessness and doubt God challenges Moses by pointing to the rebellion of the people and God’s plan to eliminate them.

Moses asserts leadership and rejected God’s plan to destroy the people. By taking the side of the rebellious people Moses demonstrated to God that God is not by nature destructive but loving and forgiving. God agrees with Moses and changes God’s mind. This is demonstrated in these words in Exodus 32:14 “the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.”

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=168

Two lessons concerning the practice of good works emerge as follows. First, exercise leadership by standing on the side of people. With respect to Moses

Karla Suomala says,

Moses sides with the people. In the remainder of the passage, Moses mounts a case before God to save the Israelites, regardless of what they've done. "O Lord," he says, "why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?" The reason for God's anger is clear to Moses. The people are worshiping idols and have apparently turned their back on God. In this rhetorical question, however, Moses makes an altogether different point: the people of Israel are not [Moses'] people but *God's* people. It was not Moses but God who brought them up out of Egypt. Moses is not going to let God off the hook easily here, allowing God to shove God's chosen people aside the first time they get into trouble.³

Moses became an advocate for the people. Despite their rebellion and practice of idolatry, Moses took the side of the Israelites. Just as Moses stood by and on the side of the people of Israel so we as the people of God are called to stand with those who are mentally ill. Mental illness or madness may indeed make us uncomfortable. Like Moses we are invited to step into the place of discomfort or madness and become leaders and advocates for God's people.

Second, God calls us, like Moses, to be advocates for God's people. God is a God of love and grace and so must we in the practice of good works. If God can change God's mind so can we. So, how do you feel about mental illness? Whenever you hear the term mad people what comes to mind? What's your view on how the

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=168

mentally ill are to be treated? What about those who become violent? Needless to say they are not mad they are simply mentally ill. Madness has been used to stigmatize people like Marcus Garvey and Alexander Bedward. It's time to move away from such stigma and discrimination and adopt the posture of Moses. As bad or rebellious as people may seem we are to stand alongside them. Do people sound absolutely ridiculous and outrageous, like those I saw on a news clip recently? Stand on their side. These persons were demonstrating that COVID-19 is not real and its fake news put out by the government. I said to myself they are not alone as their views are shared by some people in the White House. Since God changed God's mind these people can change theirs. Like Moses we must come alongside them and defend they are people loved and valued by God.

My sisters and brothers, leadership and advocacy require love and grace which are watchwords and practices for people of faith, especially as we address mental health. We see these characteristics in Jesus Christ who was a model leader and practiced love and grace by going to the cross for all rebellious people called sinners. From Jesus we learn the importance of wellbeing. This wellbeing requires leaders and advocates who will affirm the theme for World Mental Health Day: "Mental Health for all: Greater investment – Greater Access." Wellbeing or

wellness and is at the root of what Jesus Christ and Christians mean by salvation.

An approach to mental health wellbeing or wellness is affirmed by the mental health unit in the Ministry of Health and Wellness. It says “It is recognized that the majority of persons with mental illness would have been showing signs and symptoms prior to age fourteen (14) years. Hence much attention must be paid in these years to prevention, early detention and treatment.”⁴ The unit affirms partnerships and collaboration to achieve its goals. It states that “The Mental Health Unit participates in much collaborative initiatives both intrasectorally and intersectorally. Furthermore there is wider collaboration with multisectoral organizations and non-governmental organizations, in the interest of achieving the stated goals.”⁵ This partnership requires the practice of good works to overcome the challenges of mental health rooted in our colonial past. By taking a stand we build our capacity to strengthen partnerships and work towards the health of all Jamaicans. In the name..

⁴ <https://www.moh.gov.jm/divisions-agencies/divisions/mental-health-unit/>

⁵ <https://www.moh.gov.jm/divisions-agencies/divisions/mental-health-unit/>