

FALLING ON YOUR SWORD Psalm 116 I Samuel 31:1-7

Kyle Ambrogi was an All-American kind of guy, a running back on the University of Pennsylvania's football team, and a straight-A student. On Saturday, October 8, he scored two touchdowns in the Quaker's victory over Bucknell. By Monday night, he was dead- a victim of the depression from which he suffered, and the eventual suicide he committed.

His coach said he was the standard he'd hold every other player to. His mother says that Kyle was the best son you could ask for. His teachers adored him. He was the young man you wanted your own children to hang around, praying a bit of Kyle might rub off.

Kyle had a rough summer; so his coaches say, but as fall approached, he seemed to be doing better. The deceptive disease from which he suffered had ducked around the corner; it didn't disappear completely.

As his mother says, 'there are a whole lot of kids out there who feel they need to give 110 percent all the time... there's so much pressure they put on themselves, yet they keep it internalized. They don't talk about it.' Now there's a lot to talk about- only Kyle isn't around to share in it.

Suicide makes the headlines ... sometimes. It did in a big way in 1978, in Jonestown, Guyana, when 913 followers of the leader Jim Jones decided to leave this life together. Many others have chosen a similar route: Ernest Hemmingway, Marilyn Monroe, rock star Kurt Cobain, Carroll O'Connor's son, Marlon Brando's son, Carol Burnett's daughter; the list could go on and on. The "Pianoman" Billy Joel, says he tried to take his own life twice when he was a teenager. But most often suicide is hushed up.

Obituaries in the paper almost never mention that a person took their own life. I had a fellow pastor call me once for a word of advice.

He said he was about to conduct his first funeral for a person who had committed suicide. He said everyone in the family knew what had happened. But he wondered whether he should make any mention of it when conducting the funeral, or would that be violating a taboo on the subject?

It's our silence that makes us surprised when we hear the statistics. According to the World Health Organization, suicides in the last 45 years have increased 60%. Bring it down to numbers in the U.S.; suicide took the lives of 30,622 people in 2001.

Some other facts: Among teenagers age 15 – 19, suicide is the third leading cause of death. Among college students, it is the second leading cause of death. Among older Americans, the suicide rate has risen 14% in the last decade.

Every suicide intimately affects at least 6 other people. Suicide attempts are up to 20 times more frequent than completed ones. We cannot pretend that those statistics exist only outside the walls of the church.

I've been here at this church long enough to know that someone here, and likely all too many have been impacted by the suicide of a family member.

So we are part of our Second Family, the statistics are us, and sometimes we just need to talk about these things. When I first mentioned to someone what my topic would be for today, their reply was, "Well, that's a real downer." I assure you I did not choose this out of thin air; it was triggered by the newspaper, but even more by conversations I've had along the way with people who are hurting in quiet ways every day because someone they love, decided, as we say, "to end it," without warning or explanation.

One little sermon isn't much compared to the volumes of information available on the subject. History reminds us that suicide is as old as society. Socrates, Tchaikovsky, Vincent Van

Gogh, Hunter Thompson are all part of the history. One little sermon can't do everything, but perhaps I can begin to answer what the Bible says about suicide.

The word itself is never used in scripture, the commandment which applies most directly is the seventh, Thou Shall Not Kill/or Murder, but there are several instances of suicide in the Bible, a book which never tries to whitewash the stark realities of life.

You remember the story of Samson, the great warrior of Israel who pushed down the temple pillars after he prayed, "Lord, let me die with the Philistines." He brought down the pillars on himself, and "the dead whom he slew at his death were more than he had slain during his life." The Book of Hebrews calls Samson a hero of the faith.

In our Old Testament lesson, the battle tide had turned against Saul. The Philistines killed his three sons and wounded Saul. To avoid capture and "being made sport of," Saul told his armor-bearer to thrust him through with his sword.

When the fellow would not do it, Saul "took his own sword and fell upon it."

Of course, in the New Testament you find Judas, so overcome with remorse for "betraying innocent blood," that he went and hanged himself. That is the one suicide of the New Testament. But the Bible never dwells on these matters. It reports the death and moves on.

The Christian Church has had much more to say about suicide than the Bible. In the early days of Christianity, it seems some Christians were almost too eager to become martyrs for the faith. The church reacted in the 4th century by condemning suicide as a sin.

St. Augustine said it was a violation of the seventh commandment. The theologian Thomas Aquinas, using good linear logic, taught that suicide was the most unforgivable of all sins because you could not repent of it.

The Roman Catholic Church soon refused burial rites for anyone who had taken their own life. Even John Wesley-the founder of Methodism- proposed that the body of a suicide should be dragged naked through the street, in order to discourage the practice.

Though we're no longer in 4th century Rome or 18th century England, our attitudes and fears are often still there. In an article in *Presbyterians Today* magazine, a teacher in Nebraska named Sandra wrote that her mother had battled cancer for several years before asphyxiating herself in the family car. Sandra wrote, "We did our best to cope with our grief and our guilt. However, because mom had committed suicide we feared for her soul, and that made our grief more profound. We couldn't be certain than mom would be admitted to heaven."

Ah, now that *is* the question, isn't it – does God's gracious love extend even this far?

Many of you are probably familiar with that marvelous book about life in a sleepy southern town: *Cold Sassy Tree*, by Olive Ann Burns. It's a book of humor and quirky insight, much of it coming with the help of Grandpa Blakeslee, respected owner of the general store in Cold Sassy, Georgia. Three weeks after his beloved wife's funeral, Grandpa elopes with Miss Simpson, a pretty woman half his age, educated, and worse yet...a Yankee. The town erupts with gossip and more, all seen through the eyes of the 14-year old boy who tells the story.

At one point, a young man known as Uncle Camp, who was never much good at life or love, takes his own life. It's the first suicide in Cold Sassy in years. The young author writes, "Everyone was sorry poor Camp had gone to Hell so young. Camp having committed suicide, and not living long enough afterward to ask God to forgive him, there was no way he could ever be in Paradise."

Everyone assumed there'd be a quick and private burial. But Grandpa Blakeslee arranges for a wake in his home, shocking the townspeople who remembered that at the last suicide funeral the preacher had said one line, "God won't forgive this awful thing he did," and that was that. But Grandpa gave Camp a long "regular-type" funeral right in the Baptist Church. The preacher,

Brother Jones, read the 23rd Psalm and said a prayer and thought he was done, but Grandpa gave him a long hard look from the pew and the preacher said, "Let us bow our heads a-gain in prayer." This time Brother Jones prayed, "Lord, thou knowest this congregation is shocked and saddened by what has happened in our community. We know the Bible says it is a sin to take life, our own as much as anybody else's. But Lord, "hep" us to see that this boy was a poor lost soul and deservin' of compassion."

The author says, "No suicide person in living memory had ever been treated nice as Uncle Camp. Some wondered if maybe Grandpa gave some money to the Baptist church to get it done right, but Mama said that idea was far-fetched, "stingy as Grandpa is."

Thank God for Grandpa, who broke through the condemnations of society and church and becomes a compassionate theologian for us. I have the goal today that we can at least catch up to him.

We understand, I hope, that there are all kinds of self-destructive acts.

We're able to identify the factors that often underlie the act of self-destruction. Alcohol and drugs, depression, guilt, remorse, stress, and a combination of the above.

Do you remember George Bailey, in the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," poised to jump from the bridge into the river because he's in such despair.

For some it is the end of hope. Others mistakenly think they're giving the last gift they have to give...the removal of the burden of their lives.

It's for us as Christians to say 'no' to that line of thought and action. Your life is worth living because you mean something to me. Your death would not be a gift, it would be a millstone about the neck of all who love you- and there are many, indeed. The burden you seek to remove will be replaced by questions that will never be answered, by heartache that will never be soothed. The problem you think you're solving will create more problems than you could ever imagine.

No man is an island. As the Apostle Paul writes to Christians in Rome: "None of us lives to himself alone, and none of us dies to himself." Not only do our lives intertwine, but, "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." You are not your own. You belong to God.

The theologian Karl Barth put it this way, "If there is forgiveness of sins at all, there is surely forgiveness for suicide." Self-destruction is never God's intention for us; nor is it the unforgivable sin

So I struggle, as we all do...and I come out of it with my own anger of the act of self-destruction ... tempered by my understanding that sometimes despair is greater than I can imagine. Black holes are deeper than I can fathom.

Just one little sermon ... not the place to list all the warning signs that often are not detectable even in hindsight. But certainly it is the place and time to urge us to embrace with strengthening Christian love those in our midst whose lives have been touched by suicide; and the place to conclude with the great affirmation of faith given to us by the apostle Paul:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or peril or distress? No...for I am convinced -- that neither death, nor life, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is the good news we celebrate this Sunday, and hold fast, always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.