

Sermon Series: Mental Health

Sermon 1: Suicide and the Brain Psalm 139:1-13



Today we begin a series of sermons on mental health and caring for yourself, understanding the brain, and understanding it from God's perspective and how He created us.

It's difficult these days to listen to any news reports without hearing the phrases 'mental illness' or 'suicide'. I'm convinced that there are many unnecessary deaths by suicide. Just consider that phrase for a moment. It doesn't make sense. But given the rates of depression — 80% of all Americans will at one time or another take an antidepressant, because they will have been clinically depressed — it shouldn't be surprising.

There are now more suicides in our country every year than there are car accidents. And just how many deaths in a car accident are actually suicides? More people die of self-inflicted gun wounds than are in fact murdered by a gun fired by someone else. It's serious. And it all has to do with hope — or the lack of it.

The overriding theme of this sermon series has to do with understanding how hope works, because hope is just like love, and it's just like grace. It's like so many of those components of what God has given to us. But hope, in particular, works a lot like love and faith. Hope can actually be borrowed. It can be given. The more of it you give away, the more of it you get, just like faith and love — especially love.

In 2017, my brother-in-law's 47 year-old stepson, a sheriff in Phoenix, committed suicide. I read that those in the law enforcement profession have a high rate of death by suicide. (Technically, today you're supposed to say "died by suicide" and

not “committed”.) His death triggered my wife and me, for my mother-in-law had also died by suicide almost 30 years ago, and the pain of that never goes away. My daughter-in-law, who is a social worker, shared that grief is identified in different levels. A Level One grief would be over someone who’s lived a very long life, for instance, Mom. You experience grief, but also joy for them having a life well-lived.

A greater level of grief is when a parent loses a child, and especially a young child. And it just gets more complicated. Level Five grief is experienced for someone who is murdered, because you’re not just dealing with them having died, but how they died and the violence of all that. But the highest level of grief, Level Six, is felt when suicide is involved. It has to do with the fact of violence against self. And there’s usually added grief because of not knowing or having understood what was going on, or all those kinds of things. His suicide reminded me that we really have a lot to do in this country with mental health. We really need to talk about it more.

I want you to understand that feelings and emotions – the way God made your brain – has to do with chemicals and with the brain functioning a certain way. Just like other parts of our bodies work in specific ways, like our hearts, muscles, tendons, and even colons. I don’t believe we think about the brain working the same way, but it does.

So I want to say to you, as the psalmist said, “You have been fearfully and wonderfully made.” You have been made with gifts and abilities and a uniqueness that is unique to you and you alone. And on top of that, you’ve been allowed to experience things in your life that no one else has experienced. So between your gifts and your abilities, and then your experiences in life and your passions as

they've developed, you are as unique as your thumbprint. You are as unique as your DNA. And when God made you, He did not make a mistake.

Some of you may know of a man named Dr. Oswald Hoffmann. One time, he was talking to a group of teenagers, and said, "When God made you, He did not make a big pile of manure, spelled with an S. So don't act like it!" The reality is, I think many of us live our lives struggling to get past that we aren't a big pile of manure.

And that's all part of the ploy of the enemy, but it's also a part of a sickness of our brain. It's a part of the sickness that has come about as a result of sin. So let's start with who you are and how you've been made. Psalm 139 is where we're going. And I just want to walk you through verses 1-13:

"Oh, Lord, You've examined me, and You know me. You alone know when I sit down and when I get up. You read our thoughts from far away and you watch me when I travel and when I rest. The Lord is familiar with all my ways. And even before there's a single word on my tongue, you know all about it, Lord. You are all around, in front of me and in back of me. You lay your hand on me. Such knowledge is — it's beyond my grasp. It's so high that I cannot reach it.

Where, oh Lord, can I go to get away from Your spirit? Where can I run to get away from You? If I go up to heaven, You're there. If I make my bed in hell, You are there. If I climb upward on the rays of the morning sun or land on the most distant shore of the sea, when the sun sets, even there Your hand would guide me and Your right hand would hold me. If I say, 'Let the darkness hide me and let the light around turn into night,' even the darkness is not too dark for You. Night is as a bright day. Darkness and light are the same to You. You alone created my inner being."

Now, what's your inner being? We rarely stop to think about what that is. That's not your internal organs he's talking about. He's talking about that thing that makes you, you.

What if doctors could transplant brains into somebody else like they do hearts? But we know that doesn't work, right? It wouldn't work because with that brain goes all the memories, the personality, the embodiment of what makes you, you. *You* would just be in a different body. And it's because part of what our brain does is in our heart. And morals and certain things are done in the heart, not in the brain, and it's connected. When the psalmist says, "You knit me together, my inner being. You made me. I am fearfully and wonderfully made," he's saying that something is about you that is so unique, that if I got your brain, I would only be living *you*. *I* would no longer exist.

The brain and how it works is fascinating. I don't know how anyone can look at creation, how anyone can understand just the least little bit about his or her body, and think any of this is an accident. How can it be an accident?!

I was recently at the zoo, where I marveled at all the different animals. I marvel at how God is just a 'creative junkie'. He has all kinds of ideas and creations. One of the 'creative' creatures we saw was a bearded dragon – that smiled at me! (I've got a picture to prove it.) I couldn't believe it. I held it. And it just sat right here like a big broach on you. But I could feel life – and I don't like those kinds of things. But even those lizards are fearfully and wonderfully made.

"You knit me together inside my mother," the psalmist says. "And I will give thanks to You, because I have been so amazingly and miraculously made. Your works are miraculous, and my soul is fully aware of this." Now here's the thing. The apostle Paul speaks about the Romans, people who had not heard about the Lord yet still had a knowledge of God. Our souls *know*. Neither our souls or our spirits can be seen. But that's part of the inner being. That's part of how God made us. It's amazing when you think about it.

Science is understanding more and more about how our brain works. One amazing discovery is that research now verifies that when people die, their weight lessens. The researchers think part of that is the soul and the being are no longer with the body. Isn't that amazing? And some quantum physicists believe this is because our soul and our spirit are going to the next phase. I don't know. But I can tell you this. It's fascinating when you think about how we've been made.

Psalm 139 continues, "My bones were not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, when I was being skillfully woven together in an underground workshop. Your eyes saw me when I was only a fetus. Every day of my life was recorded in Your book before one of them had even taken place." You are fearfully and wonderfully made. And God loves you. He not only loves you, but He is madly *in* love with you. He just can't get over you.

If you think you've got a lot of pictures of your children or your grandchildren, you should see how many God has of us, and the places He's prepared for us when we go home. But on this side of heaven, we have to deal with this thing called sin. I'm not talking about actual sins, you know, that we commit by thought, word, and deed. But I'm talking about the results of sin on our bodies. And it's really crappy. Do an internet search, and you'll find pages and pages just of the effects of sin on our bodies.

It's most noticeable as we age. Before my dad died, his lungs and heart weren't working right, and he had Diabetes. We knew his body was giving out, but had no clue that it was giving out that much. With my mom, it's more painful to watch, because she has a form of dementia, the kind where her arteries are hardening in the most inner parts of her brain, and so she can't remember things. It's getting

worse, and it's not going to get better. Sometimes sin affects the brain. Sometimes it's the heart. Our living causes dying, because of sin. We weren't made for that.

There are all kinds of theologians who will argue this point. And then we get people who misquote the passage, "And by His stripes we are healed." [Isaiah 53:5] Yes, God heals, sometimes supernaturally. Yes, God sometimes provides miracles from this body ravished because of sin. He provides healing. Sometimes He does it through medicine. Sometimes he does it supernaturally. And sometimes He does it by death, because death is ultimately the ultimate healing. If we were really healed by His stripes, then no believer would ever die, if that was what that meant, but "by His stripes" because He went first. He was crucified, died, and buried. And here's the good news, as Paul wrote, "Whether I live or whether I die, I live." [Romans 14:8] The good news is that all of us are totally healed right now. By His stripes, whether you live or whether you die, you are healed. You are healed by His stripes. Choose to live in that healing. Choose to live with that hope.

So there's a lot of bad theology out there, and there's a lot of bad misunderstanding of many things. One example is bipolar disorder. Often people use the term as if the person has become that condition. You don't say, "I am bipolar", any more than you say, "I am cancer". Rather, "I have bipolar disorder".

So you're fearfully and wonderfully made, and that would include your brain. Here's a picture of your brain. [Display one that is colorful and detailed.] Isn't that a pretty picture? Many times when you see a picture of a brain, it's usually gray. It's not one of our prettier organs – if one could describe any of our organs as pretty. Maybe our skin? But it's a beautiful thing what the brain does. We can't see all those things. But there's all kinds of areas of our brain, and researchers are

continually learning more and more. And the more they discover, the more amazing it is. For instance, it's all connected with electrical currents.

Let's look at John chapter 1 where it says, "And in the beginning was the light. And the darkness could not put it out." I'm telling you, there's something about light – electricity – because electricity is captured; it's never made. That has something to do with the force of life as God created us. Because if you're dying, what do they do? They shock you. It's an electrical current. Your brain has an electrical current going on, and it's chemically based. And so how does that work with our being?

Your brain is affected by sin, by the consequences of sin, just as every other part of your body is affected by it. So we're not surprised when people get cancer. We're not surprised when people have heart issues or knee problems or kidney failure.

So why don't we get it when the problem is in the brain? I think because we've over-spiritualized the brain. But the brain is no more spiritual than any other part of your body. It's physiological. It was created out of dust. And to dust your brain will return. When you die, your brain doesn't come out of one ear and crawl off somewhere. It stays in there.

Here's a few interesting factoids about the brain. Did you know that your brain is the size of the head of a cauliflower? When I read that the first time, I thought, "Mine is sometimes just one floret of cauliflower!" Another description is that it looks and feels like a 3½ pound lump of firm tofu. It comprises about 2% of your body's mass, but it uses about 25% of the body's energy. Isn't that amazing? Scientists estimate that the brain receives 100 million bits of information per second and contains 100 billion cells, many of which are neurons. These cells have a thin, complicated shape like the branch of a tree. They can be as short as a

millimeter or as long as a meter. One end is the axon, and the other end are the dendrites — the twigs on the branch. The neurons communicate with each other by sending chemical and electrical signals racing down the branch at 200 mph.

You may have heard in the news about this Hyperloop project, a high-speed train in a vacuum tube. It will transport people up to 760 mph. And here your brain is going 200 plus mph. (That's after coffee, right?) In contrast, I suspect the signals in individuals whose brains don't work properly — in mania, for example — could give the Hyperloop a good race!

So, when the charge reaches the end of the cell, it leaps across a synapse, and the space between these two twiggy-type branches is triggered. Doctors can actually see this on brain scans. It's amazing, again an example of how we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

But like everything else, sin has messed up the brain, too. So where God intended that perfect balance of being able to focus, but also being able to be creative and to do all these things, our brains are out of focus. The chemicals misfire. This organ, just like your heart, doesn't always function the way it was properly intended.

Now, lest you think you don't have a brain problem this morning, you do. Okay? How many of you can remember every single thing, always? I believe that instead of looking for something you've lost, it's just easier to go buy something new. But no one can remember everything. And if you put three people out on the street here and there's a car accident in front of you, how many different versions of that accident are you going to have? Four — or more! Siblings — even twins sometimes, don't experience everything the same way. We are not alike in how we see things, how we experience things.

I'm telling you, the brain is affected by the fall of mankind into sin. It will decay with the rest of your body, if in fact you're buried. It will be disintegrated if you're cremated, just like the rest of your body. So I want to encourage you today to just thank God for your brain. What a wonderful thing. Some of you, God made much more analytical. (That would not be me!) Some of you are creative. Some of you are students of science. Some of you are mathematical. Some of you are this, you're that, and combinations thereof. And just as your thumbprint is so unique to you, so is your innermost being the way that God created you.

How many of you spent time in junior high wishing you were somebody else or looked different? I think that's normal. I always wanted blond hair and brown eyes and a tan. (Laughs.) Now the tan I could have done something about, but I never did. And I wanted to be thin. I could have done something about that. But, genetically, I'm just not too predisposed to go that direction. Because we all have default settings, right? Well, you thought your nose was too big or 'this' was bad or 'that' was bad or you wished 'this'. [I have flat feet. I was glad, because that meant when I had to register for Vietnam, I wasn't going to be taken up, because they said, "Hey, you've got flat feet. We don't want you." And I was like, "Oh, yes!"]

But the interesting thing is that while we spend all of our lives trying to be something that we haven't been created to be, or wanting to be something other than we are, when the Father looks at you through Jesus, and He even looks at your brain, what He sees is the child He created to flourish, the child that He made to be who you are, using your gifts and your abilities. And, actually, that's the child He is in love with. He looks at you through Jesus and what Jesus can do with your brokenness and the things that don't function quite properly, and sees what Jesus

can do. Isn't that amazing? God loves you a lot more than you could even begin to be in love with yourself.

And God loves all the people that you love and you think are so cute and unique, like grandchildren or children. He loves them more than you can even imagine. So this morning I just want to give you the assurance that, yes, our bodies are broken. Our bodies don't always function as they should. [Insert personal experience of avoiding going to the doctor, not refilling needed prescriptions, etc., and the negative results.]

But my point is, certain things don't work right. But in Christ, you are who He made you to be. And you are so unique. You are so special to Him. But the enemy wants you to believe exactly the opposite. Even the foolish mistakes that you've made, even the bad choices, and even places where you've fallen way short, He can do remarkable things with, because He is the one Who made you. I want you to rest in that fact this week. I want you to picture your brain. And when you picture it, envision that picture I showed you earlier — pretty, colorful. If I was really going to do this up, I'd have you color your own brain. I would. I'd give you crayons and a blank outline of a brain and say, "Fill this in the way you think your brain looks in color."

Some of you might have gray, but most of you would have color, uniquely made. And no matter how you might think your life's not going like you wanted it to go, you are so unique that, within your setting, God intends to use you in miraculous and wonderful ways.

Prayer: Jesus, I just ask that, for each person here today, You would let them know how they are uniquely knit together in You, that You've given to them a focus, a purpose to use their gifting and to use what You made them to be in their

innermost being, in their soul, in their spirit, in their personality, Lord, the things that we can't find anywhere physically. You in fact wired us together to become who we are. Jesus, help each and every person to not only hear that, but to believe it deeply in their hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So I just want you to remember this. Your mind is what your brain does. Your brain was made by God to create your mind, and your mind is the mind of Christ if you are a new creation. So, go and be who He made you to be. And don't be somebody else. That's copying. And then who's going to be you? Amen.