

Breaking the Silence Surrounding Suicide©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Some of you might be wondering why a minister with any sense would decide to get up in front of their congregation and talk about suicide. One way to address that question would be to pose another question. Who says that minister has any sense? Hopefully both questions will be answered by the time this sermon is finished.

There are many other answers to the first question. One answer is that our First Principle calls us to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. In my prior career as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, there were many times when someone would share with me that they were contemplating suicide. Many of these people didn't feel they had inherent worth or dignity. Many of them were feeling overwhelmed, alone and uncared for. With our First Principle in mind, and recognizing that September is Suicide Prevention Awareness month, I came to the decision to speak on this important topic today.

Another answer to the question is that as a religious leader I frequently have to be willing to speak to issues that people would rather ignore or deny—issues that might just rattle our comfort zone or shake us out of our complacency. Those of you who were here last Sunday heard me speak about one such issue, the issue of global climate change and what is needed to address it. Suicide is another issue we need to be willing to talk about and take action on. It is something we need to talk about and be willing to take action to prevent because between 2001 and 2017 the suicide rate in this country has increased by 31%. I believe it is essential that we pay attention to the rising rates of suicide. And I believe we need to take action, action that will save lives. So today I want to break the silence surrounding suicide. I want us to consider how we might have a role in preventing someone we meet from taking their own life.

Let me begin by challenging an assumption which is held by many. That assumption is that everyone in their right mind wants to keep living as long as they possibly can. This is often an unconscious assumption. The vast majority of the time we live our lives desiring and expecting to live as long as we can. But that assumption isn't always in line with reality. Some individuals in their right minds reach a point where they question whether they can cope with another day of purposelessness, hopelessness, pain or suffering. At such times any one of us might think about ending our life.

It might be helpful here to share one person's story that involves such a situation. This story is just one example of how a person could begin to think about ending their own life. It is a story about a young male in his late teens. This teenager was enrolled in high school and he was doing well academically. He was also dealing with some of the typical issues that can arise in late adolescence. As is quite common at this stage of life, he was experiencing some difficulties with his parents. He was certain they had no idea of what life was like for a teen like himself. This was a period of life when he was seeking to discover who he was. Part of that process involved differentiating himself and also distancing himself from his parents.

In the midst of this stage of seeking to “finding himself” he experienced some significant challenges. His closest male friend from childhood moved away. As an adolescent male he downplayed the importance of this loss. Soon after his best friend moved away he experienced a situation that shook him to his core. The young woman he had been dating came up to him one night at a football game to show him the ring she was wearing on her finger. It was the class ring of his next-best male friend. As is true today, wearing a ring given by another can be an indication of the commitment between two people. She was letting him know, in no uncertain terms, that their days of dating had come to an end.

That singular event was a double whammy. He no longer had a girlfriend or a next-best male friend. This situation left him wondering if there was anyone he could trust. He wasn't even sure he could trust himself. He had, after all, chosen to be involved with this young woman and the male friend she was now going steady with. It seemed quite clear that his choices regarding who was trustworthy were at best questionable. The young man knew immediately that he was dealing with a difficult situation. He didn't at that point know that what was to occur the following day was going to significantly amplify the struggles he was dealing with.

He didn't get much, if any, sleep that night. And early the next morning he headed out with his father to a remote cabin in the woods. They were going to the cabin in the woods to hunt deer. For the next three days he sat in the woods with a rifle in his lap while dwelling on what he perceived to be the end of some very important relationships. He couldn't wrap his head around what had happened. The feelings of loss, sadness and betrayal were more than he knew how to cope with. He wanted an answer that would make the thoughts and the pain go away. He held one possible answer in his hands as he sat in the woods. That possible answer was a high-powered rifle. With a simple pull of the trigger the rifle had the capacity to end his thoughts, his pain and his life in an instant. Firearms, by the way, are the cause of approximately half of all self-inflicted deaths.

This is just one story, a story about a high school youth. For those of you who may not know, suicide is a common cause of death for youth and young adults. According to the Center for Disease Control, or CDC for short, in 2014 suicide was the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 10 to 39. But this age demographic isn't the group that is at the highest risk. In 2017 the age group that had the highest rate of suicide included those between 45 and 54. The second and third highest rates were people who are the elders in our communities, those 75 years and older.

Last year, more than 47,000 people took their own lives—which made suicide the 10th leading cause of death. More people take their own life than are killed in automobile accidents. The number of suicide deaths alone should be enough to raise our concern and our attention regarding this issue. But there are other statistics that may be even more startling. One such statistic is the number of people who attempt suicide and fail. It is estimated that in 2017 more than 1,400,000 people attempted to end their own lives. Do the math and that means of those who made an attempt, one person out of thirty succeeded. The other 29 didn't die. They survived, often with

physical, mental and emotional wounds as a result of their unsuccessful attempt. Now I want to take this out yet another level. In 2013, the CDC estimated that over 9,000,000 people in this country seriously considered ending their own life. Let me repeat that number—more than 9,000,000 people. If the CDC estimate is correct that means that one out of every 34 people in the nation thinks seriously about suicide in any given year. One out of 34. Look around the room. We have more than 70 people here today. Can you identify the two or three people that have thought seriously about suicide in the past year? I will admit that I can't, even with my mental health training and background. We often can't tell by simply looking at another person. This is the reason we need to break the silence around the topic of suicide. If we can break the silence, we may be able offer an opportunity to those who are having thoughts of ending their life—an opportunity to share what they are struggling with. Those who are having suicidal thoughts need people to share with—people who will not judge them. If we can be there for them without judgement, they might be able to avoid or overcome feelings of guilt or shame and speak about what is troubling them.

As both a minister, and a mental health professional, I know that it is challenging to listen to someone tell you that they are thinking of ending their life. I have found myself in such discussions more times than I can possibly count. Surveys conducted with trained mental health professionals have found that for many of these professionals, fear of a client committing suicide is their top concern. Even professionals who are trained to talk with people about very difficult and serious issues feel fear when it comes to hearing from another that the person they are in conversation with is thinking about ending their life. Having experienced that fear myself, I am certain many of you have similar feelings of fear around the thought of talking with someone who is contemplating suicide. If more of us could prevent our fear from getting in the way, we could find ourselves being there with and for someone who is struggling with thoughts of suicide. Research shows that when a person who is having suicidal thoughts has someone who cares and offers support, the likelihood of them killing themselves is significantly reduced. I imagine that what I am suggesting here, that we work on our openness to having someone speak to us about suicide, may feel like a daunting challenge to many in this room. It is quite possible, and maybe even probable, that what I am suggesting is too big of a challenge for some of you. I want to let you know that my suggestion is just that, a suggestion. And it is a suggestion that comes with no judgement, no guilt and no shame attached. Judgement, guilt and shame are of no benefit when it comes to preventing suicide.

I want to return now to the story I shared with you earlier. Some of you might wonder how I came to know the young man I spoke of. Was he a client during my career in social work? Might he have been a friend? He was neither a client nor a friend. The young man in the story was me fifty years ago this fall. Clearly, I didn't pull the trigger. I can't say how I did it, but somehow I convinced myself that ending my life was a permanent solution to a short-term problem.

Very few people have ever heard the story I just shared. I have shared it with you today not to bring attention to what I went through, but to speak to the topic of suicide from a personal perspective. One of the things I hope for is that by sharing my own

story I will let anyone who may be having suicidal thoughts know that it is not just okay, it is important to share the thoughts you are having with another person. It is important to share those suicidal thoughts with someone who will listen—someone who can be caring and supportive. I also made the decision to share my personal story because I am absolutely certain that I am not the only person in this room who has had thoughts of suicide. It is likely that some of you may have never shared your story. I hope my sharing gives you permission to tell your story to someone. If we are going to break the silence surrounding suicide many more of us will need to tell our own stories. By doing so we may be able to bring the topic of suicide out of the closet and into the light of day.

As I stand before you today, I recognize that as a 67 year-old white male my risk of either attempting or succeeding at suicide are significantly higher today than when I was a youth. And according to national statistics, my risk will continue to increase for the remainder of my life. Let me assure you, I am not having thoughts of ending my own life. But someone you know, someone sitting next to you, or someone you may encounter in the days ahead, may be thinking about doing just that, ending their life. How might you respond to them? If you were to find yourself with such a person, would you be willing to raise the issue of suicide? Would you ask questions in a gentle and caring way—in a way that will convey openness to their struggles and compassion for them as the person they are? I hope so. Doing so might just make all the difference—the difference between life and death.

So may it be.