

So, as you heard from Margie Wauford at the start of the service, this time of year can be incredibly difficult for people, for a variety of reasons.

Maybe someone is struggling with grief over a lost loved one, or lamenting that the holidays aren't what they used to be, or they're dealing with stress because of dysfunctional family matters, or they're having an extra-tough time battling their addiction and staying sober at this time of year.

Or, perhaps they struggle with depression and the lack of daylight combined with the holiday frenzy really takes its toll.

Or, maybe someone is just feeling stretched and overwhelmed because of how much money they're expected to spend.

And they find themselves having to make difficult decisions about whether to meet people's expectations and spend money they don't have, or suffer the social and familial consequences of not spending money.

This time of year can be challenging, for a wide variety of reasons, but it's especially difficult for those who struggle with mental illness.

I want to share an excerpt from an essay written by Kat Kinsman, who has depression. She writes,

"I'm in a Las Vegas hotel room, hiding from Christmas.

The odds are not in my favor.

This is not a... campaign to counter anyone else's annual allotment of holly jolly joy.

If it were up to me, I'd quietly exile myself from the merrymaking so as not to dim others' bliss like a burned-out bulb on an otherwise twinkly light strand.

I'm not a Grinch or a Scrooge or any of the other soot-stained slurs hurled by people fed up with a loved one's reluctance to join the reindeer games.

What I am is depressed.

In the cold, dark, ash-end of the dying year, it is hard for me to pry my head from my pillow and draw breath into my lungs -- let alone don gay apparel and fa-la-la along with the rest of the festive public.

But I do it -- alongside countless other people suffering from seasonal affective disorder, active grief, debilitating panic, PTSD and a whole host of other emotional issues that are thrown into sharp relief amid the mandatory revelry.” (Kinsman, Kat. “A Depressive’s Guide to Christmas. www.CNN.com).

The church is in a unique position because we are called to be a place of warmth and welcome for all people, especially those who feel awful.

We say that you're welcome here, as you are, you don't need to wear a mask or pretend to be cheerier, happier, nicer, smarter or wealthier than you actually are.

My concern is that people who find the holidays to be triggering might want to go anywhere other than church at this time of year, because the church, or Christianity, is why we have the season in the first place.

We are responsible for Christmas, we are why it exists.

I know commercialized Christmas has taken on a life of its own and it barely resembles the Christmas we prepare for in here, but nonetheless, we're all about the season, here in the church.

The songs, the scriptures, the month-long discussion of Jesus' birth, the Christmas carols that will be sung before the service, the Advent wreath and other decorations, everything we do at this time of year could be challenging for someone who is trying to avoid thinking about the holidays.

So, we don't need to diminish our festivities, but we do have a responsibility to be attuned to people's sensitivities.

That can be challenging because mental health concerns are often invisible.

That person you're interacting with who was just rude to you, or who you don't understand, or the person who said 'no,' when you asked them to do something, you don't know what they're thinking about, what they're struggling with.

Whether anxiety, depression, grief, PTSD, or just overwhelming stress, so much of what weighs on our hearts and minds is invisible.

So, I ask that we be a little gentler and a little more patient with one another at this time of year.

That we try a little harder to be more gracious, to give people the benefit of the doubt when you have a conversation that doesn't quite click.

There are also people whose disabilities are visible.

Someone you know might look more down than usual, more tired, more disheveled, more frazzled.

If you see someone who looks different, check in on them, ask them how they're doing.

In today's scripture, Jesus tells his disciples, *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

At this time of year, we are really good at feeding people, as evidenced by the In Gathering last week.

We are also really good at clothing people, with our Coats for Kids collection and collecting warm clothing for the Lowell Transitional Living Center.

But are we good at taking care of those who are sick, especially mentally and emotionally?

Are we good at welcoming the stranger, the person who seems foreign to us, whom we don't understand?

Here's the thing, every time Jesus engages with someone who is "demon possessed," in the Bible, he's ministering to someone who is mentally ill.

They didn't have words like multiple personality disorder or schizophrenia back then, so they called those things demon possession.

They thought that people were possessed by evil spirits, when really their brain chemistry was just a bit different.

But the same truth stands the test of time, which is to say that mentally ill people during Jesus' time and mentally ill people today, are more vulnerable than the rest of us.

They're more powerless than the rest of us, which means it's our job, as Christians, to care for them.

To make space for them at the table.

When Jesus talked about the 'least of these,' he meant the people whom society sees as the lowest and the least, and even today, people with anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions are stigmatized.

Especially at this time of year when people might not want to be at parties or with their families or in stores or restaurants, our church needs to be the place where everyone can come, no matter how they're feeling, and know that they can exhale and drink deep from the waters of God's love.

Now, today is a special day for me, and I was planning on spending the entirety of my sermon talking about why today is special to me, but when the opportunity came up to talk about mental health and the holidays, it was a perfect fit.

You see, today is the 5th anniversary, to the day, of my starting my call here, at this church.

My first day in the office was Monday, Nov. 26, 2012.

One of the reasons why today, my anniversary is the perfect day to talk about being welcoming of everyone, especially those who are vulnerable, is because it's one of the reasons why I first fell in love with this church.

It was important to me to find a church that was serious enough about their faith, to be welcoming of all people, even when it means we have to stretch ourselves a bit, out of our comfort zones, to make space for others.

We know that the more diverse we are, the more we all gain.

We know that we are richer because of the diversity of life experiences, opinions, theologies, and backgrounds which are encapsulated in the bodies sitting in these pews.

Among the many things I love about our church is that we give people the benefit of the doubt.

We think twice before making a judgment.

We apologize when we've done something regrettable.

We forgive and we make amends and we don't let old wounds fester.

When I was interviewing with churches, one of my mentors told me to be honest.

He said, don't tell them what you think they want to hear, tell them your truth, because if you don't you'll regret it later on when you realize they hired you based on a misrepresentation of yourself.

And one the members of the search committee told me that one thing they appreciated about my interviews was that I answered their questions.

I didn't dodge them or use them as a way to pivot to what I wanted to talk about.

I was honest and I answered the questions they asked me.

Well, one thing I loved about the church from the start, that I don't think I've told anyone on the search committee, is that they were honest too.

They spoke authentically about the church's strengths and growing edges.

We still have those growing edges today, we're still working on constantly becoming more aligned with God's will for us.

But one of our strengths that I noticed back then, which I believe we're even more committed to today, is welcoming all people.

It's not just lip service.

We mean it, and we try hard to be a Christian community that has space for everyone, even the weirdoes, the misfits and the people who feel like they don't belong anywhere.

I'm proud that our logo says, "All are welcome. All are loved."

Because it's true.

We work hard to answer Jesus' call to welcome the vulnerable, powerless and the outcast, into our community.

And I hope we spend the coming years working to become that much better at widening our welcome.

Because there are a lot of hurting people out there, who are aching for the healing love that we have in this sacred place.

Here's to five more years and beyond. Amen.