

2024 Cutting Edge of Mission Award Recipient
Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries
Address by Daniel Whitehead, CEO
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Honorable Commissioners to the 2024 General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, distinguished members of The Cutting Edge of Mission Award Committee, and everyone else – My name is Daniel Whitehead and I am the CEO of Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries, and it is an incredible honour for me to be here with you today. On behalf of our board, our staff, and our supporters, we are so incredibly grateful and excited for this recognition of what we have done, what we are doing, and what we will continue to do, to help make the Church a Sanctuary for mental health here in Canada. It is pure joy for us to accept The Cutting Edge of Mission Award 2024 – and we count it an incredible honour to join an illustrious list of people and organisations that we admire and look up to.

Sanctuary is an organisation that believes that wherever Christ is proclaimed as lord, should be the safest place for people on their mental health journeys. At Sanctuary we believe that all people should feel safe in the church with their mental health, and all lived experiences of mental health challenges belong in the body of Christ. It is this belief that drives our work to create high quality educational resources and increasingly artistic creations that offer hope to people in crisis, and equip the church to support mental health and wellbeing. I have had the privilege of leading this organisation for 8 years and watching it grow from a local in-person ministry in Vancouver, to becoming an internationally renowned organisation at the forefront of educating the Church to be sanctuaries for mental health. It is something that we as Canadians can be proud of that our country has created an organisation that is impacting hundreds of thousands, and has the potential to impact millions more, around the world, in the years ahead, God willing.

Back at the start of 2020 I traveled over to the UK to do some filming as part of my work with Sanctuary. As a part of what we do, we go out and we film the stories of people who have lived a life of faith with a mental health challenge, and on this particular day we were in the north of England. We had gone to Durham to film with a theologian based at the university there, and having filmed with him, we then drove on to a small town just south of Durham and we met with a lady named Simone who lives with the unique experience of schizophrenia. After sitting with

her and listening to her story and the wisdom that came forth from her experience of life (which you can hear for yourself in the Sanctuary Course), I realised that I had been totally unprepared for the depths that she would take me, so much wisdom came forth as she spoke.

But one of the things that majorly impacted me about Simone was the levels of stigma that she faced as a human being. In her own words. Her socio-economic background (as someone who identifies as a working-class person), her racial background (as someone representative of a minority ethnic group), her learning difficulties, and her diagnosis of Schizophrenia made her a heavily stigmatized person. To put it another way, in the eyes of wider society, she has a long list of things that people see, before they see the person. Before they see the beloved daughter of God, the friend of Jesus, the member of Christ's body.

The subject of stigma is a very serious one. The word stigma comes from slavery. Chattel slavery was common throughout Europe and North America in the 16th-18th centuries, the idea being that a person was an object that could be purchased and owned by someone else. A slave would be purchased and then branded with a branding iron (and that mark, that wound, that scar, became known as their chattel) and all of that person's significance and worth was reduced to that mark that they carried. Their sum total personhood was revealed in this wound that they would carry as a marker of who they belonged to – this is where the word stigma comes from. It is a mark that people carry that others see instead of seeing the whole person.

Now we don't brand people with hot irons any more, but we do brand people with labels that can be almost impossible to escape from.

And the subject of mental health and mental illness is one such sticky label that we often place upon people. Where we see the diagnosis before we see the person, the beloved child of God, the friend of Jesus, our brother and sister.

If we're really honest, our Western European influenced culture would say that our value is attributed to what we can produce and how much wealth we can create, and how self-sufficient we can be, but the bible presents a very different picture of the value of a person – which is that we are not made primarily to produce, but rather we are primarily made to relate, we are not made for independence and self-sufficiency, but rather we are made for interdependence. Sometimes I wonder: what if we valued the ability to love, and the need to be loved, more highly

than our ability to be self-sufficient and materially productive? What kind of society would we have? Who would be the people that we would lift up and seek to be like?

Today I want to read from the gospel of Mark, and in it we encounter a woman who was heavily stigmatised, and we see how Jesus breaks the stigma that had kept her from being seen as a beloved child of God, and a valued member of God's community.

Mark 5:25-34

24 *So Jesus went with him.*

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. **25** *And a woman was there who had*

been subject to bleeding for twelve years. **26** *She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew*

worse. **27** *When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and*

touched his cloak, **28** *because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."*

29 *Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.*

30 *At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"*

31 *"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"*

32 *But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it.* **33** *Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the*

whole truth. **34** *He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."*

For 12 years, anyone who came into contact with this woman was considered ceremonially unclean. She was entirely cut off from religious and social life. For 12 years, she was untouched, unspoken to, ignored, despised, and isolated. This rejection would have caused immense mental and emotional suffering beyond just her physical ailments as if that wasn't bad enough. One can only imagine the toll it took on her mental health to be so totally alone and estranged for so long.

As an outcast with no money or support, she languished in poverty and was forgotten by society. Every day reminded her of her status as a despised outcast. When she touched Jesus, she feared his reproach, she expected him to declare her unclean. But that doesn't happen and Jesus asks her to speak up and identify herself. And after 12 years of strict isolation, the prospect of speaking up in public would have absolutely terrified her as well. But Jesus insisted that she identify herself, it's as if he is saying for the first time in 12 years she will speak and others will listen. He gave her the space to use her voice. She was physically cured – and a miracle had taken place.

However, this miraculous curing brought about more than just physical restoration. By curing her biologically, Jesus removed all barriers preventing her reengagement with community life and spiritual worship. He may have cured her physically, but make no mistake, he healed her by reconnecting her relationally to God and others and herself. When we are seen and accepted and loved in community, it becomes a lot easier to love God and ourselves. When we are stigmatised and rejected by society it becomes a lot harder to receive God's love and to love ourselves as our neighbour.

While the biological cure was immediate, the deeper healing was a process that was just beginning. Jesus began her recovery by eliminating all the factors that excluded her from love, care, support and the rest of humanity - her basic needs. I would suggest that the deeper healing that Jesus offered people was not primarily about a biomedical curing, but rather it was relational, Jesus restored people to community by removing stigmatising barriers and providing a space (now called the church) for people to heal and be seen and loved in community.

And this destigmatising story leaves me asking a question: What if spiritual friendship is one of the primary means through which God is making all things new? In John 15:15 we have this pivotal verse where Christ our Lord says, "I no longer call you servants, now I call you friends".

God in flesh speaking to a lost humanity, saying you are my friends. That statement changes everything for us, and to do the same, by offering friendship to someone in the midst of a mental health crisis, changes everything as well.

And of course, we must remember that the church has historically met very real practical needs in society. A number of years back the late American Sociologist, Rodney Stark started researching why the Christian worldview became the dominant worldview in western culture: why not another ancient worldview? And the result of his research was that it was the sanctification of human life, revealed in the practical service of society that won the hearts and minds of the Roman Empire. It was the Christians staying to tend to, and often die with, the sick during the two bubonic plagues in Europe. It was the Christians who systematically patrolled the garbage dumps of Rome looking for discarded female babies, discarded by parents who had wanted a boy. It was the faithful witness of Christians giving up their lives with a posture of prayer and peace, that broke the hearts of Rome – it was by their love that they knew there was something different about these Christians, these followers of the way. And of course, the reason that there are churches at the centre of every town city and village in every western nation is because the communities were built, and I mean literally built, around the church building, because the church building was always the practical expression of God's love through healthcare, welfare, justice, education – meeting the wider society's pragmatic needs. The history of our faith has always been about taking what we believe about God, and practically outworking that to others in ways that offers practical help and hope.

And what this story in Mark 5 would do well to remind us of is that every story has a context and a trajectory. Of course, life is filled with moments and seasons, seasons of languishing and seasons of flourishing – we as God's people are part of a story which makes this theme central.

And of course Jesus, God incarnate, had mental health. And we see in scripture times when he languished: think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating droplets of blood, or think of him hanging on a cross crying out to his father. The bible makes space for every human experience with inclusive compassion, including the difficult experiences, and so we too must convey this sense of inclusive compassion to all lived experiences...and especially to those that are crying out but getting no response. Can our suffering hold a redemptive space in our communities? Well, if we are enabled and empowered to bring it into the open in a way that is safe...I for one think it can.

Now on that trip to Durham those few years back, after we had filmed with Simone, we drove up to Sunderland because we had made contact with a man through a very tenuous link. This person had been really hard to pin down, but we had one email with an address, a date, and a time, and that was it. So, we drove up from Durham to Sunderland at night, in the dark. We parked on this little street lined with row houses, found the number and rang the bell. We saw lights on inside, and waited for what felt like an age, and just as we were about to say, "yeah, this ain't happening", the door opened and here was this man who was pretty unsteady on his feet.

We soon realised why it took him so long to answer the door: it was because Mick lived in a converted Garage at the end of the garden of a small row house which had been subdivided into four properties. We walked through the hallway, our the back door and to the end of the garden and into Mick's home, a converted Garage, large enough to park a car in and a small tool shed. The home was in some disarray, but we settled in, set up the camera, and began chatting with Mick. It became very evident very quickly that all of the footage we were filming would not be usable. Not only did Mick have a very strong northern accent, but his speech was slurred due to the medication he was on and it was hard for him to string together more than 4 or 5 words in a row.

And yet, when I think about the work that I have given my life to doing at Sanctuary, I think of Mick. Because in Mick I was confronted with a man who through all intents and purposes was completely forgotten by society: he lived alone, he was unable to communicate effectively and the medication he was on to help with his experiences of psychosis left him with a number of very difficult side effects and ticks, which he carried in his body. And yet, as I spoke to Mick, I found out that he was a former teacher and a passionate musician, evidenced by the guitars lying around his home. And I said to him: "Mick, will you play us a song?" At which point he took his guitar and strummed out a tune as he melodiously sang to us. And in that space my awareness of God's presence heightened, and I knew it was as if I was in the presence of Christ himself.

It was in listening to this man play music, seeing the hidden life that was within him, hidden by his scarred and stigmatised body, confronted with so many unanswered questions, that I saw through the stigmatised façade and saw God's image. As I thought of Mick's unanswered questions, I was confronted with the unanswered question that Christ screamed out from the

cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It's a question that just hangs there as Christ hung there, a question that does not get answered. As I left Sunderland, I left wondering what I would do with Mick's story.

Well, three months passed by, and I got an email from someone and she said,

"Hello, you don't know me...my father was a man named Mick, and he passed away a month ago, and I found a single email written to you to arrange some filming, and would love to know if you still have it. I didn't see my father much before he died, and he didn't have any friends, and it seems like this footage might be quite important for me and my sister".

Meeting Mick was not about the film, or fulfilling some organisational agenda that I had. It was about seeing Mick, hearing his story and encountering Christ in the midst of his story, and sitting with him in the un-answered questions. I think if we the church can learn to do this for each other then we may just begin to create a church that makes a little more room for people in the midst of mental health languishing to find their place in the body of Christ.

If renewal/revival is to come to the church in this generation I believe it will come about through a church that will stop and sit and listen to the stories of people in pain...if we can learn to listen, and lay down our preconceived ideas of what a life "should be", then I believe we will experience and hear the voice of Christ afresh in the voices of those like Mick who are desperately seeking shalom in the midst of the storms of life.

In preparing for this talk, I found the last email that Mick sent to me, sent after we had filmed with him, and shortly before he died. He concluded his letter by saying:

Please pray that I can have the grace to do what I can for folk like me. There's a battle ahead. It's gonna be won but it's up to us to keep the faith.

God bless you all,

Mick.

Mick was fighting his own battle, hidden away out of sight from others, and of course what he needed were others to fight with him and for him. You may not see the battle that someone is going through, but that doesn't mean it's not real. And one thing that we all need are friends around us who can see through the stigma and remind us of who we are as beloved children of God.

Thank you for this award, we are deeply moved and profoundly honored to receive it, and this award will motivate us to continue to fight for others...like Mick.