

Devotion for Week of October 9, 2022

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

I have been reading in the Atlanta Journal Constitution about children and teen suicide increases. This is very disturbing to me. I remember when I was a child welfare social worker that we would occasionally have a child or teen hospitalized at Ridgeview Institute or the children's unit of the Georgia Mental Health Institute on Briarcliff Road. GMHI is now closed and the building part of Emory University. Ridgeview, which we used to think of as the cream of the crop for psychiatric care for children, is heavily criticized in the newspaper article. When our society moved from heavy institutions for mental health to community mental health, the entire program for both adults and children basically failed. No money was allocated for community health, there was a severe shortage of trained social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists to deal especially with children, and for the last 25 years, we've not gotten any better in providing this care.

I have personal experience with two friends whose children became very depressed and anxious. Fortunately, they did not become suicidal or have to be hospitalized, but this process of trying to find therapy and perhaps medication is frightening for parents. When I was doing my ministerial internship in South Africa, I had a family whose son was in drug rehab treatment but hanged himself in the facility. As the father said, "This is not the way life is supposed to be – parents don't bury their children."

We must do better. We used to have social workers for each school, as well as a school nurse. Mostly gone or very limited now. My friend who was a social worker at one metro high school retired in exhaustion. She just could not work with everyone who needed help. That leaves teachers as the front line for spotting children in trouble, and we all know they are terribly overworked as it is. One parent in the AJC article said that one of her children who committed suicide (she had two who did so) never showed any signs and kept his depression and despair a total secret. This is where the church comes in. Youth pastors who take the time to really get to know the children in their churches are vital. Ministers who make children and youth welcome and spend time listening to them are helpful. Congregational members who "adopt" the young people of the church as their own help build a protective community. In one small church of mostly elderly people, a 15 year old was asked why he attended. He said very simply, "because they love me and they care about me. I know I can reach out to them for help."

I hope you will help me pray for our children and youth in today's disturbing world where "friends" are made in 10 second internet hook-ups, and not in neighborhood and church one on one interactions. Let us pray that we can help by reaching out to children in our community and families and let us remember what Jesus said in Matthew 19: Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Jeanne