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College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

Mental Health Disorders and the Divine Unconditional Lover

Sydney K. Dugas

Theological Conversation

Anna Mercedes

May 8th, 2020

“Sydney, when you get old enough, you either lose functioning of your mind, or you lose functioning of your body. Grammi is just struggling with her mind right now.”

“Do you think she could forget about God?”

“Well, yes, she is forgetting things. I don’t know if anyone could forget God, though. I guess it could happen.”

This conversation has been in my mind since my grandma was first diagnosed with dementia when I was in 11th grade. Up until then, my mom always had the answers for the tough questions. This was new for me; my mom wasn’t sure about something so difficult for me to wrap my head around that I ended up needing and craving to know more ever since. This eventually led me to a senior capstone project idea that I couldn’t shake no matter how hard I tried. How can someone who forgets God be able to live in union with Her after passing away? This question that has always been in my head inspired many follow up questions that pushed me to look more deeply at mental health disorders and how they relate to the idea of salvation.

Mental health disorders can cause high levels of distress not only for the people experiencing them, but also for those who are close to that person. Even more distressing is the idea of what comes next, what happens when this person passes on, and how can we cope with letting our loved ones pass if they do not have the mental capability to have faith or love God. If someone does not have faith and love for God, is salvation possible? Are cognitive abilities, a sound perception of reality, and empathy really needed for you to love God and vice versa? We

have been taught that in order for salvation to be possible, you must have faith in God and love Her, making salvation into a difficult topic to think about in relation to our loved ones struggling with mental health disorders. No matter what a person's state of mind, God is the Divine Unconditional Lover who ultimately provides the basis for salvation. God made us in Her image and likeness, She loves us unconditionally, and the age of reason can be easily argued to prove that mental health disorders will not keep us from union with God.

I want to take time to say that disorder is a word that has a negative connotation biblically and theologically, but for the sake of this paper, disorder is not meant to be derogatory or demeaning in any way, it is just the best way to describe what is going on in someone's head. Disorder is a term used to describe something in psychology that is not normal among most people and is appropriate to use in the context of this paper. Another thing that I should address is that I will be using She/Her/Hers pronouns in reference to God because that is the way I relate best to Her, and it is always good to look at God in different ways.

Dementia

Dementia affects nearly 50 million people worldwide, and that does not include the external suffering in those who are connected to the individual who carries the diagnosis. Those who have dementia experience a very slow death, one that takes away their cognitive abilities and continues to do so until their body cannot remember how to complete basic human functions. There are many things that can cause dementia, but it is most often due to Alzheimer's disease. Dementia because of Alzheimer's disease occurs because of severe degeneration of the cerebral cortex, which controls higher thought processing, decision making, and speaking capabilities.

The classification of Alzheimer's disease cannot be confirmed until autopsy, and even then, it can only be determined whether it is 'probable' or 'possible'. It is probable when there is genetic mutation found in the brain, and all of these symptoms are seen: clear evidence of decline in memory, learning, and at least one more cognitive function, steady progression of decline in cognitive functions, and no other evidence of another disease that would cause cognitive loss. A possible diagnosis occurs when one of the two criteria is met: either genetic mutation or all those symptoms together. This major change in cognitive abilities happens rapidly at first and then slows down until an inevitable death. As of right now, there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, however there are medications to slow the process and therapies designed to retain cognitive functioning. Keep these things in mind for when we talk about why this creates an issue for salvation. Are memory and cognitive abilities needed for salvation and union with God?

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a psychotic disorder that does not affect as many people as dementia does, but still has a lasting impact on a person's cognitive capabilities. It is said that there are 1.5 million people worldwide diagnosed with this disease each year but more than double of that are undiagnosed in the United States alone. Patients experience a disruption of reality and struggle to think, behave, and feel normally. The main symptoms of schizophrenia are delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, and inappropriate affect, all of which usually result in occupational dysfunction. These symptoms usually come in episodes and stay with the person periodically throughout their life, but they can learn how to manage their symptoms in a healthy way and lead a pretty normal life without too many problems. There are medications available to help with certain symptoms, but not all of them, and cognitive-behavioral therapy can help a person to adapt to the real world while still experiencing minor distortions. No one with

schizophrenia can live completely without their symptoms. Though it is possible to work through it, it is not easy, and families tend to struggle to support someone who is not making sense or is not the person they used to be, and it can be hard to have the same amount of love for that person as they used to. Unfortunately, these things do cost money and the support of friends and family is necessary, which does not give many of the people experiencing homelessness the ability to fully cope with this disease. Most undiagnosed patients do suffer long term and ultimately die as a result of the disease. The disruption of normal thinking and the tendency to commit crime and be arrested because of schizophrenia is high among the homeless community and that can result in a difficulty to talk about salvation and schizophrenia together. More specifically, can someone who struggles to know reality or to make sound judgements achieve salvation?

Antisocial Personality Disorder

Psychopaths have a personality disorder in cluster B that causes people to have a tendency toward committing crimes and manipulating people to get what they want. There is an estimated 1-2% of the general population that are considered psychopaths, but this is not the best estimate since people normally are not diagnosed or treated because it is a personality disorder. A psychopath suffers from an antisocial personality disorder, which means that they do not follow societal or ethical standards, they have high self-esteem, are usually very calculated in their actions and decisions, and have an inability to love, feel remorse, or be sincere. This is usually a result of many things, not just biologically, but also socioculturally. Biologically, sometimes there is a genetic predisposition of the disorder, and socioculturally, the environment that someone grows up in can make it more likely that someone will develop the disorder. Due to the type of symptoms and the tendency to stick with them as it is a personality disorder makes treatment very hard, as you cannot medicate this disorder, and a person will usually resist any

kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy offered to them. The lack of empathy is cause for concern when talking about salvation for those who suffer from an antisocial personality disorder. Is empathy, love, and faith needed to become unified with God?

So, now that we have a basic level of knowledge of these mental health disorders, we can see that there is a disconnect between a union with God and someone suffering with a mental health disorder. The goal for Christians is to be in union with God, to follow in Christ's footsteps, to achieve salvation. Salvation is a cornerstone of the Christian faith, something that is important yet never talked about. And if someone doesn't have the mental capacity to have union with God that would mean they could not achieve salvation, and that would discount a lot of people from eternal life. As our Divine Unconditional Lover, I don't believe God would ever do that.

Salvation

Before we dive into all the problems associated with these three mental health disorders, we must talk about salvation. Ever since I was a little girl, I have been told that you need to have faith in God in order to be saved. Salvation in a very basic and solely Christian sense is achieved through your love of God and faith that Jesus died to save you from your sins. Faith means that you have trust in God, and love translates to having a deep affection for Her. It is necessary for both things to be in place so that you can have full union with Her at the end of your life on Earth. This gives us a problem because for you to have salvation, you must have the mental capabilities to have faith and to love. So, what happens when you do not have those capabilities?

Dementia

The main issue when you talk about dementia and salvation is the problem patients have cognitively. When they get to a certain point in the degeneration of the brain, the patients are unable to remember anything at all. Lack of memory means no faith and no love. Lack of memory, at least in a normal context, means that these patients cannot technically achieve salvation. Lack of memory then means no union with God. At least that is what I have been told. How can that be true if God is a God who loves us unconditionally? One of the best authors that I have found on the topic of dementia in a theological sense is John Swinton, he actually wrote two books that I will be referencing in this paper, the first being *Dementia: living in the memories of God*. Swinton says, "In the end only God knows who we are; only God can search our hearts and recognize who we really are. God creates us, sustains us, and knows us." so if we have had faith and love for Her prior to dementia taking over, then we should be fine, right (*Dementia: living in the memories of God* 5)? But what about those people who wait until the end of their life to find their faith, or love God, would that completely discredit them and leave them to be stuck never knowing this Divine Unconditional Lover we call our God? What happens to people who forget, so much so, that they end up passing, and because of that did not end their life knowing God? I do not believe that God would be so cruel as to not give those people a chance, to let them suffer like that, especially since they are made in the image of God and are unconditionally loved by Her. This lack of ability to think and remember must be something that God saw in the future of these people's lives. To give the lack of memory to someone or to have someone get dementia and just say, you don't have memory or thinking capabilities and so you are not able to be saved, loved, or in union with me is just not God-like.

That would make God out to be someone who loves who She chooses to, an exclusive God, which is not who I believe God to be.

Schizophrenia

Salvation and schizophrenia have problems if you cannot get the support and the medications you need. Schizophrenia is estimated to affect around 20% of the homeless community, which is roughly 114,000 people in the United States. Those people do not have access to the medications or the support they need, so how are they supposed to get better and function well in society. People with schizophrenia struggle with knowing reality, have delusions, and hallucinations among other things, how can we expect them to have faith in God or love Her. The inability to know reality means that they will not know whether God is real and true in their lives, which would be especially difficult during psychotic episodes. One common delusion among those with schizophrenia is feeling as though they are a gift from God, like the second coming of Christ. This false belief can ruin a normal relationship this person could or maybe would have had with God. Again, God makes us in Her image, and so how can we say that someone who ends up struggling with schizophrenia is not made in Her image anymore. And if that is the case, that God is not one I would put my own faith in, I have faith in my God being the Divine Unconditional Lover. I mentioned earlier that Swinton had written two books that would relate well in my paper, the second one is rooted in pastoral care surrounding schizophrenia called, *Resurrecting the person: friendship and the care of people with mental health problems*. In this book, Swinton argues that even if someone forgets or is in a state of confusion there is the common, "...knowledge that God has not forgotten God's people, and that the covenant promises remain secure offers comfort and hope in the midst of suffering, confusion, and chaos. God's remembering is not an act of sentimental retrospective reflection,

but rather a powerful act of affirmation and commitment to his continuing involvement with human beings in history.” though this seems like it could fit best in more of a dementia argument, it shows how versatile these arguments are (*Resurrecting the person: friendship and the care of people with mental health problems* 124). People with schizophrenia also deal with memory loss, so how different really are these diseases, and how can we make excuses for one and not the other? God discounting those with schizophrenia because they cannot have organized thoughts or memories again would mean that God is not the Divine Unconditional Lover I view Her as, and that is not the God I choose to believe in. This person was made in the image of God, just as much as you or I are, and therefore is loved unconditionally, just as you and I are.

Antisocial Personality Disorder

I would argue that the topic of salvation and antisocial personality disorder is the most difficult of the three. When someone has this type of mental health disorder, they are more cognitively aware and so the biggest problem lies in the fact that they cannot love. This lack of empathy makes salvation nearly impossible because it means that they cannot love God or have faith in Her. But again, I want to make the argument that God created this person just the way She wanted them to be, so how can we say that this person is ultimately damned to hell and separated from union with God. I think there cannot be a real reason why someone is just discounted from the unconditional love of God. Especially if this person cannot help that they have a personality disorder that technically makes them a psychopath. Gretchen Thompson, author of an article named, “Personality Disorders and the Dying Experience: Reflections on Pastoral Care”, from *Chaplaincy Today*, talks about this more directly. She says that, “People with personality disorders are often rigid or inflexible, lacking the ability to adapt or self-correct. This is not their fault per se; it is simply the way their personalities, for reasons both

environmental and genetic, have become formulated over several years.”, showing us that this is not only a struggle for those suffering, but also for people trying to help treat those with personality disorders (Thompson 9). Personality disorders, like those who are psychopaths, usually come about because of a combination of their genes and their environment, both of which are God-given. So, if this disorder is a God-given thing, then how can we say that since this person is unable to love and have faith in God, that they won't achieve salvation if this was the way that She made them. It is completely beyond our control if someone becomes a psychopath, or gets dementia, or schizophrenia, too. That is something that is in God's control, and we as humans are still supposed to come to have faith and love Her, it is impossible to do so when you are set up this way. God is not someone who sets humans up to fail, She's someone who sent Her one and only son to help us, to restore our life, to die for our sins, and to leave an example of how we are supposed to live life in a meaningful and good way. She loves to help us out, She wants us to succeed, so we have to come to realize that any mental health disorder is not a way to separate us from Her, but really a way for Her to become closer with us here on Earth.

All those problems with salvation pile up and make it impossible to believe that salvation is possible for someone with a mental health disorder, just imagine if you had one! But if there is one thing I know, God breaks all those things down because we are made in Her image and likeness, She does not expect everyone to be able to reason, and, of course, God is the Divine Unconditional Lover who does not let anything stand in Her way of loving you. She breaks down every wall and will continue to do so to become fully unified with everyone because that is how much love She has for us. Salvation is possible.

Made in Her Image and Likeness

We all know that God made us in Her image and likeness, the Bible hits us with that right away in the first chapter of Genesis and continues to go on and say that what She creates is very good. Let me say that again, each of us are made in Her image and likeness, and she sees that we are created very good. If God made us in Her image and likeness, and we are very good, then people with mental health disorders are very good and created just the way She wanted them to be. She knows us well, we are told that She knows the words on our tongues before we even say anything, She made us and we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139 tells us these things and goes on to say that our days were formed for us, and that they were set before we even took a breath in this world. We know that She made plans for everyone, as it tells us in Jerimiah 29:11, that these plans give us a hope and a future. God knew that this person would end up with a certain mental health disorder, there can be no way that what She would have intended that to happen if that would break the union they could have with Her after passing from this world, that would not bring anyone a hope or a future. God wants us to be in a relationship with Her, and for Her to just pick certain people that She wants to be in union with would make God into an unjust God. God makes masterpieces, and that is not just limited to a certain type of people, Ephesians chapter 2 tells us that. And when you think about that word, masterpiece, you can rest in knowing that everyone is made perfectly by God and that She is proud of the things She creates. Salvation here is possible because everyone is a created masterpiece and God would never purposefully intend someone to slip from union with Her when creating new life.

Beyond an Age of Reason

Next, I want to bring up the idea of infant baptism and how that relates to the salvation of people with mental health disorders. As Catholics, when we baptize infants, we do so through taking the faith of the parents and godparents as representative of the faith of the infant, because

infants do not have reason and cannot make choices about their faith at the time of baptism. In the baptism rite it says, “You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training him (her) in the practice of faith. It is your duty to bring him (her) up to keep God’s commandments, as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor.” so not only does it suggest that the faith is not there yet, but it also says that loving God is something that needs to be taught (Catholic Church 395). After going through the whole baptism in the Catholic faith, the child can no longer be damned to hell if he or she were to pass. Through the actions of baptism, people who do not have reason should be able to achieve salvation. Baptism is something we do once, and so you could argue that once someone is baptized, the person should be considered ‘saved’ if he or she were to be beyond an age of reason. I would think that a mental health disorder would fall under the category of beyond an age of reason, and so salvation is possible for these people.

Divine Unconditional Lover

The most important of my three arguments must be the fact that God is the Divine Unconditional Lover, and therefore nothing can separate us from loving God and having Her love us. People with dementia are not forgotten from the love of God because they do not remember Her and therefore cannot love Her. People with schizophrenia are not hated by God because they are unsure of the reality of their life, God made them just the way She wanted them, and She loves them. People with antisocial personality disorders are given bucket loads of love, just as we are too, even if they do not have the ability to love God back. God knows our hearts and minds even if our human loved ones do not ever fully know us. God knows what is going on inside our heads even if it looks different from a human perspective. Romans 8 tells us that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, that we can find joy because God is for us

and so who can stand to be against us? This passage shows us the extent of God's unconditional love; it is unquestioning, unrestricted, full, absolute, and limitless. And when we know these to be true, we will know that God's love is for everyone, always. Even if we do not have the normal cognitions, the normal perception of reality, or the normal amount of love that usually is needed for someone to have faith and love in God and therefore find salvation in Her.

We know salvation to be possible, and that is great, but we can take this deeper. If God has this unconditional love for us, why not give some of that to the people who struggle to feel it, especially those with mental health disorders? I want to challenge you to show God's unconditional love to others through radical friendship, being present, and seeing their personhood. That way, the reign of God is more easily seen by those suffering with cognitions, reality, empathy, and more. This will allow us to be the hands and feet of Christ and become closer in union with the Divine Unconditional Lover Herself.

Radical Friendship

One thing that we can do in order to show God's unconditional love is to be in radical friendship with those struggling with mental health disorders. This is best described with the words of Swinton, "The model of friendship presented in the life and work of Christ offers real possibilities for therapeutic change. Committed friendship that reaches beyond culturally constructed barriers and false understandings and seeks to "resurrect the person"-who has become engulfed by their mental health problems-is a powerful form of relationship. It offers hope and new possibilities to people with the types of mental health problems..." friendship based on Christ's example gives us an easier way to show and receive God's unconditional love

(*Resurrecting the Person* 138-139). We are called to be radical friends with people struggling with mental health disorders because of Christ's example of being with the marginalized, the rejected, and the outcasts of society. True friendship allows people with mental health disorders to feel hope, and this support gives them a way to therapeutically heal from whatever assumptions have been making them feel small or unworthy of love. Jesus does this when he talks with the Samaritan woman. Swinston says, "...Jesus makes himself marginalized and unclean. However, in doing this he takes her into the community of God, resurrects her personhood, and heals her brokenness." Jesus showed radical friendship to this woman who was an outcast, and we are called to do the same (*Resurrecting the Person* 142).

Presence

Not only are we called to radical friendship, but we are called to presence, too. Swinston makes an argument that says, "*To love one another, we need to be present for one another.*" and "Presence means taking time seriously." so for us to truly be the hands and feet of God here on earth, we need to be *with* people (*Dementia* 229). Swinston's arguments are specifically for those experiencing dementia, but I do believe that being present with anyone can show God's unconditional love and can be especially meaningful for people with mental health disorders. God is present with us and will always be present with us and in order to have meaningful connections with people and allow them to feel as though they belong, you must be present with them. "The key, then, is to create places of belonging where people with dementia and those who offer care and support to them can find a place that is truly theirs and within which they can express the full experience of dementia..." Swinston agrees that being present with people allows for them to feel worthy, loved, and that they belong, which is the hardest part about dealing with a mental health disorder (*Dementia* 278). As humans, we know when people are

being present with us and when they are not, and we often get discouraged when we are not given undivided attention from someone we love. Imagine how someone with dementia would feel if they knew that a good amount of the time you spent visiting them was not spent being there and present with them but rather on your phone. Being present with someone is another extension of God's unconditional love, and we are called to do this to show those with mental health disorders how truly valued they are.

People, not Disorders

Another thing we can do to show God's unconditional love is to treat everyone as the people that they are, not as the mental health disorder they have. It's common to refer to someone as a "schizophrenic" or "antisocial" but that is very dehumanizing. It becomes their identity and makes them into some kind of creature, not the person that they truly are. We need to talk about the person as someone *with* schizophrenia, or *with* an antisocial personality disorder, not *as* the disorder. By restructuring the way we speak about people then, "...the person can be enabled to accept the illness in a proactive, constructive, and potentially health-bringing way." this will lead them towards a life that is more fulfilling, and allows them to feel a greater sense of belonging (*Resurrecting the Person* 138). As we focus on people as people first, we can see their humanity more clearly, and as a result will begin to see the beauty that God placed into everyone he created. We will begin to see them as creations of God who are loved by God, and therefore deserve to be loved by us. People with mental health disorders are typically marginalized, just as the tax collectors and sinners were in Luke 15. Society at that time did not like or care or try to understand those people, just as we do today to those with mental health disorders. They are exactly the kind of people Jesus would be hanging out with and loving before coming and loving the 'normal' people. If we can learn to view those with mental health

disorders as people first, we can break the norm of marginalizing and putting these people who are created and loved by God into a box marked “Unwanted” or “Unworthy”.

No one deserves to be loved by God, we could never earn it, and we cannot expect it, and yet She loves us unconditionally. She loves us when we will not talk to Her, She loves us when we do, and the love She has for us is unwavering. How would it feel to be loved like that by just one human person on Earth? It could very well change your life. So why not show this unwavering, selfless, God-given love to the people who need it most, to the people with mental health disorders? By focusing on their humanity, being present, and attempting to show radical friendship to them, we show them that the reign of God is coming and will soon be present on Earth. If you look at the facts that we are made in Her image and likeness, there is an age of reason, and we have a Divine Unconditional Lover, we know that if we slip into some kind of mental health disorder that takes away our ability to have normal cognitions, changes the way we see reality, or does not allow us to have empathy or love for others, God’s unconditional love is something we can rest and have peace in knowing that salvation is possible. God’s unconditional love shows us that salvation is possible, and that ultimately no mental health disorder can separate us from a loving union with our Divine Unconditional Lover. I want people to look past the difficulties that may be obvious to human eyes, and learn to love people for their personhood, not their mental health disorders or anything that keeps them from being considered ‘normal’ by societal standards. In sum, God’s unfailing, unconditional love provides the basis for salvation, and because of that people with mental health disorders are not discounted from a beautiful union with God when they pass from this life and move on towards the eternal life that has been set before them.

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