

We Are Not Alone: Climbing Out of the Black Hole

By The Rev. Kathie Galicia

I was sitting in my car at the corner of Vintage Drive and Sisk Road in Modesto, waiting for the light to turn green. As the vehicles rolled across my line of sight, I suddenly noticed that they were of more than one color. A tan sedan caught my eye, then a dark green pickup truck, followed by a royal blue van, then a bright red convertible. I looked up at the traffic light and saw that it was also red, although a different shade than the car that had just passed. So what? From the time we open our eyes in the morning until we shut them again when we drop off to sleep, our world is filled with color of every spectrum, hue, and intensity. Some of us even dream in color! Why am I mentioning the mundane experience of watching traffic pass by? The experience I had at the corner of Sisk and Vintage happened more than 15 years ago. The previous summer, I visited my brother and his family in my home town in western New York for about ten days. Not long after my return to Modesto, I realized I was not feeling good. I was tired, yet did not sleep well, had little appetite and no energy. I thought that perhaps I had picked up a virus in my travels so went to urgent care. I felt like when I had mononucleosis during my freshman year of college, and insisted they do a test. When the doctor gave me the results, I was shocked. No evidence of 'mono,' instead, he believed I was clinically depressed. Over the next couple of weeks, even as my regular doctor took over my case, I slid down a steep, dark, slippery slope into what I called "The Black Hole." I was there for about three months before I finally felt like I would get out of that dark place. The very first hint that I was returning from the depths of depression was that moment in my car when I noticed that I could actually see colors again rather than the monochromatic hues of gray, black, and white that had been my world for so many weeks. Soon after that, I began to taste food again, and eventually regained a healthy weight. I began to look forward to returning to work and school, and could converse in sentences instead of monosyllables. My experience is not unique. In fact, a significant percentage of Americans will be affected by depression in their lifetimes, either personally or through someone in their family who suffers from it. Most of us who get through it will be able to live a normal life, although some of us will remain on anti-depressants. It is one of the most common ailments of our time but frequently goes undiagnosed and untreated, especially among young people, who are actually at higher risk than older adults. The topic of depression and its related partner, anxiety, has recently come up in some conversations I've had with parishioners, and I thought this might be an opportune time to share my own experience. Sometimes, as I've read about depression within the Christian community, it feels as though there is even more stigma attached than among those who are not affiliated with a church. Is it because we are made to feel guilty for being depressed? If we truly believe that our Creator God loves us unconditionally, even sending Jesus Christ to overcome sin and death in order to save us, what should we have to be depressed about? How dare we not be happy Christians, 24/7? The reality is that none of us have perfect lives; no one can be happy all the time. The causes of depression are many: situations such as grief and loss, biological or hereditary factors, changes in brain chemistry, side effects from other health issues are just a few. People who have survived cancer or a heart attack are very susceptible; even as they recover their physical health, their mental health may suffer.

I'm broaching this subject to see if anyone would like to explore the topic more fully. Perhaps there may be an interest in meeting to study the issues and to seek help to navigate the paths leading to better mental health for us and those we love. In case you're wondering how depression is diagnosed, I'm sharing the following that is on the website of the National Institute of Mental Health: NIMH.nih.gov: If

you have been experiencing some of the following signs and symptoms most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks, you may be suffering from depression:

Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
Feelings of hopelessness, or pessimism Irritability
Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
Decreased energy or fatigue
Moving or talking more slowly
Feeling restless or having trouble sitting still
Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
Difficulty sleeping, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
Appetite and/or weight changes Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
Aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems without a clear physical cause and/or that do not ease even with treatment

Not long ago, Bishop David called our attention to the problem of addiction in our society, speaking out boldly and inviting us to do so in our own congregational setting. I agree wholeheartedly that in addressing these kinds of difficult topics, we invite God to walk alongside us as we look at the ways in which we can help others. Clearly, help is need both in our churches and outside the walls, too. God creates us to be healthy and whole beings, and wants us to be the very best we can be. Sometimes half the battle is just realizing that we are not alone.