A Disease which Knows no Boundaries

As the evening news programs were winding down Monday evening, we were startled by the sudden announcement that Robin Williams had been found dead in his home in California. Later in the evening and the next day, further news bulletins reported that the cause of death was suicide.

What a shock. Robin Williams had earned a well-deserved place in the pantheon of Hollywood celebrity. His comic work, especially his gift for improvisation, was universally admired. His roles in more serious films had also won acclaim. And for a generation of children, his voice alone will always be recognized behind the characters for a handful of Disney classics. Whether “Mrs. Doubtfire,” or “Goodwill Hunting.” or “Aladdin,” Robin Williams endeared himself to a legion of fans.

Mr. Williams spread joy off-screen through his charity work. He worked with Comic Relief, the Christopher Reeves Foundation, St. Jude Hospital to name a few. He was a passionate supporter of our military troops and performed many times in the Middle East to scores of active duty soldiers and sailors, much like the Bob Hope shows of old. He was also a life-long Episcopalian who in his adult years supported the church, even with his gift of humor. He was also an avid bicycle rider, a sport which I also enjoy. It is tragic enough that Robin Williams in now gone and will never add to his body of work. But how could it be that such a gifted person, such an acclaimed artist, could fall victim to his own depression and take his own life?

What I do know as a pastor is that depression is a deadly, sinister, insidious disease. It claims victims from all walks of life, from people of faith and people without faith. Depression can overwhelm even the strongest, the healthiest.

Robin Williams suffered from depression, fueled by chemical addiction to drugs and alcohol. How ironic that so many self-medicate themselves in an effort to get high or to escape from the demons which haunt them. How ironic that we resort to these drugs which only further compounds our psychological neurosis.

When a celebrity takes his or her own life, we wonder how it is that a person who has achieved so much success and acclaim could be so profoundly unhappy. How is it that a person who has so much and so much to live for can take his own life?

Sad to say, all pastors deal with these dynamics. Yes, we would like to think and we do believe that our faith and incorporation in the community of faith would ward off the depression demons. But lest we forget, we are dealing with illnesses. Depression, drug addiction, and alcohol dependency are illnesses. We need not cast moral judgments on the victims of these serious diseases. Nor should we look the other way and avoid engagement in the struggle. With the number of Hollywood celebrities who have fallen victim to depression, drugs and suicide, it would be tempting to pronounce an indictment on the entertainment culture.
I would prefer to offer some constructive, positive thoughts. First, all of us need to attend to our physical AND emotional health. As basic as that sounds, it is where we must start. Our health can be adversely compromised by factors beyond our control. But we can also develop healthy lifestyles. For example, I was recently taken by Pope Francis’s “Ten Steps to Happiness” statement. Among the Pope’s suggestions: “Live and Let Live,” “Proceed calmly in life,” “Be giving to others,” “Stop being negative.” “Respect others’ beliefs.” Good guidelines for happiness and health.

Second, we need to find our voice and recognize that these illnesses claim far more victims than wars, crime, car accidents, cancer, or heart attacks. The real cost in terms of broken relationships and the secondary consequences of depression and addiction are almost impossible to calculate. Mental health concerns must have priority in our quest for adequate health care.

And third, we are again reminded that happiness is not necessarily related to wealth and success. The biblical injunction for a good life - “to do justice, show mercy and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8) stands the test of time and culture. Those who do “walk humbly with their God” will still go through the valley of the shadow of death. But hopefully, they will also come to know that the Good Shepherd leads them beside still waters and restores their souls; hopefully they will know that they will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The next time I hear the iconic voice of Robin Williams or watch one of his classic films, I will feel some real sadness and loss. I will also hope that somehow, in the fog of his own depression, Robin Williams knew that he was a child of God, deeply loved.

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August 15, 2014