



## ***Stations of the Cross with Reflections on Mental Illness***

Tom Frieberg, originally from Albany, NY, is a healthcare chaplain who lives in Vancouver, WA. He did his chaplaincy training at the Oregon State Hospital (a secure, inpatient psychiatric facility). He has also volunteered and served on the staff of his parish, [St. Andre Bessette Catholic Church](#), in downtown Portland. Tom's work in the parish's outreach ministry provided another opportunity to serve and learn from individuals living with mental illness. Those two ministries—Oregon State Hospital and Saint Andre Bessette -- informed and inspired this *Stations of the Cross with Reflections on Mental Illness*. (The stations themselves are slightly different from the traditional ones many of us are accustomed to. These are based on a Stations of the Cross that Saint John Paul II used on Good Friday, 1991.) Tom is married and has two grown children, a daughter in law, and three grandchildren. He can be reached at [tfrieberg@gmail.com](mailto:tfrieberg@gmail.com).

### **† Stations of the Cross with Reflections on Mental Illness**

#### **† The First Station: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane**

*Then they came to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray," and he began to feel sorrow and distress. Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me ."* (Matthew 26:36-41)

"My soul, sorrowful even to death." How many people have uttered words like these? Depression and other illnesses can punish us to our core. And then, often: a desperate plea for friends to be nearby.

Lord, in the agony that is depression, give strength and courage to those who suffer, and compassion and support to those who love them.

#### **Suggested response:**

WE ADORE YOU, O CHRIST, AND WE PRAISE YOU. BECAUSE BY YOUR HOLY CROSS YOU HAVE REDEEMED THE WORLD.

OR

SHOW ME THE PATH I SHOULD WALK, FOR I ENTRUST MY LIFE TO YOU. (PSALM 148:3)

#### **† The Second Station: Jesus, Betrayed by Judas, is Arrested**

*Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs. They laid hands on him and arrested him.* (Mark 14)

Arrested and betrayed. Sadly, our jails and prisons are often *de facto* psychiatric wards: addiction, hallucinations, and more, endured behind bars. Our brothers and sisters sometimes locked up in places not designed or equipped to care for them. Our system betrays them.

Forgive us, Lord, for betraying You as you sit in our prisons and jails, often ill and frightened.

**R:**

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### **† The Third Station: Jesus is Condemned by the Sanhedrin**

*The chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward [ . . . ] "He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? What is your verdict?" They answered[ . . . ] "He deserves death." (Matthew 26)*

Power. The power of the state, the power of the church, the power of money or bureaucracies. The fact is, many people with a mental illness can actually live safe, productive lives. But power not only corrupts, it can also condemn. Whether callous leaders, inadequate health insurance, unenlightened employers, or other causes. Too often the result is the same: condemned.

God, help us to use our power on behalf of those in need. Open our eyes to injustice and help us turn condemnation into compassion.

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### **† The Fourth Station: Jesus is Denied by Peter**

*One of the women in the courtyard said to Peter, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it . . . saying, "I do not know what you are talking about!" [ . . . ]. "I do not know the man." Later he began to curse and to swear, "I do not know the man!!" (Matthew 26)*

Mental illness often comes with social stigma. Family, friends, coworkers might struggle with what to do or say, maybe ignoring your pain, or even avoiding you. Intentionally or not, it feels like they deny knowing you. Or sometimes it's the sick person himself who denies the family, incapable of relating to them anymore. Loved ones become alienated, friends become strangers. Relationships are denied.

Lord, we don't want to deny You. Like Peter, we don't expect to deny You. Help us live in solidarity with You and our brothers and sisters, free from the fears that can poison relationships and weaken communities.

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### † The Fifth Station: Pilate Releases Barabbas

*Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas... and handed Jesus over to be crucified.  
(Mark 15)*

Wishing to satisfy the crowd. School kids, or even adults, who join their peers in teasing or mocking the disabled. Retailers who call the police on a man behaving strangely in front of the store because “customers are starting to complain.” Government officials who give in to homeowners who insist that a proposed halfway house not be built in their neighborhood.

Help us, God, not to confuse mob mentality with wise policy, or the ways of society with the ways of the gospel. Give us the courage to do your will even when it’s unpopular.

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### † The Sixth Station: Jesus is Scourged and Crowned with Thorns

*Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged. And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head . . . and they struck him repeatedly. (John 19: 1-3)*

Beaten. Struck repeatedly. Maybe mugged while sleeping under a bridge. Forcibly restrained during a crisis episode. Abused by a spouse or partner. The truth is, people with serious mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it.

O God, show us the way to less violence in our homes and communities; help us understand that depression, drug addiction or delusions can lead to bleeding, bruises or broken bones. Heal us: body, mind and spirit.

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### † The Seventh Station: Jesus Carries the Cross

*Carrying the cross himself, they went out to what is called the Place of the Skull -- in Hebrew, Golgotha. (John 19)*

“Carrying the cross himself.” Schizophrenia, addiction, bipolar disorder - if someone has it, they carry it all the time. To family get-togethers, to work and school, in public and in private. It’s there, and they carry it.

Lord, give strength and courage to all who carry such crosses. Fill them with your spirit as they walk an often-painful path.

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### **† The Eighth Station: Simon of Cyrene Helps Jesus Carry the Cross**

*They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, to carry his cross. (Mark 15)*

They carry it everywhere, but no one should have to carry it alone. We are followers of messiah who carried his cross, and we can act with friendship, charity and justice to help our brothers and sisters carry theirs.

Fill us, Lord, with empathy and compassion. By loving those with mental illness we are loving You, and we are privileged and blessed to help you bear the cross.

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### **† The 9th Station: Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem**

*A large crowd followed Jesus, including many women who mourned and lamented him. Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves and for your children, " (Luke 23)*

Women are twice as likely as men to develop PTSD. One in four Oregon women who give birth report symptoms of prenatal or postpartum depression. Children of mothers with mental illness are at high risk for serious developmental and behavioral problems. They are also twice as likely to be placed in foster care.

Jesus, look with kindness on all women who live with mental illness. As they care for themselves and their children, grant them courage, strength, and community support.

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### **† The Tenth Station: Jesus is Crucified**

*They crucified him between two criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. . . . Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." (Luke 23: 33-34)*

As Jesus dies beside two thieves, we're reminded again that the mentally ill are too often criminalized. In some cases, perhaps, not even knowing what they did to end up in jail. But the real tragic ignorance lies too often in our social and legal structures.

Lord, enlighten our leaders who know not what they do. Where they see criminals and the need for punishment, help them see illness and the potential for recovery.

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### **† The Eleventh Station: Jesus Promises His Kingdom to the Good Thief**

*One of the criminals said: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied to him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23)*

He attends daily mass in a downtown church, his belongings taking up half the pew. The congregation makes room for his occasional mutterings or outbursts. His mind is wounded, but his faith is strong, his love for God apparent, his prayers sincere.

God, in our zeal to serve those with a mental illness, help us remember that they are often our fellow believers. Baptized disciples, as we are. As we offer them the church's assistance, help us also to value the gift of faith they bring *into* the church.

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### † The Twelfth Station: Jesus Speaks to His Mother and the Beloved Disciple

*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. (John 19)*

"Sandra" was found by the police one rainy night. Shivering and recently beaten, she was also hallucinating. She was brought to the emergency room, then eventually to the state hospital. She hasn't seen her mother in years, but her mother comes to visit her today. They hug, then take another long look at one another. Sandra thinks: "Mom looks so old! How has she aged this much? When did that happen?" Her mother, meanwhile, stifles a cry as she sees her daughter's bruises. *Daughter, behold your mother. Mother, behold your daughter.*

Help us, Lord, to love and honor each other as members of your family. Bless us, as You entrust us to one another in all our giftedness and brokenness.

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### † The Thirteenth Station: Jesus Dies on the Cross

*Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"; and when he had said this, he breathed his last. (Luke 23)*

So many moments when we need to rely on God. Trusting a doctor and the psychiatric drugs she has prescribed, despite the harsh side effects. *Into your hands I commend my spirit.* Admitting to ourselves that there's nothing more we can do right now for a suffering loved one. *Into your hands I commend my spirit.*

Lord, at the hour of our death -- and in those small, daily deaths we all encounter -- be with us as we doubt, or shake with fear, or lose all strength. Embrace us. Into your hands we commend our spirit.

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### † The Fourteenth Station: Jesus is Laid in the Tomb

*A rich man from Arimathea named Joseph was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body. Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it in clean linen and laid it in the new tomb he had hewn in the rock. (Matthew 27)*

In 2004 3,500 old, battered containers of cremated human remains were discovered behind a locked door at the Oregon State Hospital. More than three thousand deaths, dating back as far as 1913. Ignored for decades. Over the next ten years laws were passed, remains painstakingly identified, families reunited with their loved ones remains when possible. Artists were commissioned and a contemplative, sacred public space was created. Unclaimed remains are now preserved in new, ceramic canisters in a memorial wall and courtyard. Some of the old containers, now empty, are also on display, symbolizing those years when the dead had been dishonored.

Jesus, by living and dying as one of us, You assure us that life *and* death are sacred. Inspired by Joseph of Arimathea, may we treat the dead and the dying with dignity, and comfort those who grieve.

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### † Closing Prayer:

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, You have shown us the way of the cross. Through the mystery of your passion, death, and resurrection, may your disciples become good neighbors, good allies and good news for those who live with mental illness. Amen.