

Getting Strong (or "Love Works")  
Mental Health Sunday  
May 16, 2021  
FCC

Today is mental health Sunday. The entire month of May is Mental Health Month. It is a time to reflect on ourselves, our loved ones and strangers in our community who suffer from mental health disorders or are addicted to drugs or alcohol or both. It is a time to ask the questions that there are no easy answers to. I certainly do not have answers today. I do have some examples of how love works. Compassion works. Even in situations when punishment or banishment or at least indignant anger seem justified and called for, is there a way that we can remain true to our mandate from Jesus to love one another? Is there a time when we can depart from that mandate, saying basically, "Listen here, enough is enough! Outta here! You're fired! Fired from life, fired from love, fired from the warming fires of hope. Is there a time when our hearts *should* turn to stone? Is this "tough love?"

Or does love work, after all? See, putting our faith in love very often makes the wait longer. Choosing to love many times makes us feel out of control. Walking the Way of love makes us feel foolish at times, makes us feel as though we have been duped, conned, and seriously taken advantage of.

I was a messed up twenty-one year old. Very messed up. I suffered from crippling anxiety and depression. I was confused about my future, so confused I got married to someone just cause I didn't know what else to do. Never do that. It doesn't work. After two months of absolute chaos, heartbreak, hysteria and growing social panic, my new husband and I decided to pull a "geographic." What is a geographic? A geographic is when you think that if you just move somewhere else, all will be well. If you have different scenery outside your window, you'll have a different experience in your soul. Doesn't work! Because wherever you go, there you are. At the restaurant where my mother worked, we stopped to have breakfast on the way down to Arkansas. When my husband left to get his wallet my mom asked me, "Are you happy?" I began to cry. She told me, "Just come home." And I did. It was one of the hardest things I ever did. I came home, got into therapy, regained my strength, moved to my own apartment and finished my degree. Love works.

Many years later a young man took a wrong turn. He got involved with some friends who smoked a lot of bad stuff. His mother came to visit one day and found his room in such disarray she knew something was horribly wrong. Her son came to the car window as she was about to leave. "What's going on with you?" mom asked. The son's eyes filled with tears. "Get in," she said. The son got into the car and said nothing. "Is it heroin?" asked mom. "How did you know?" came the reply. After that moment of truth, the son got help. After intensive counseling, some ancillary health issues, the son got stronger. He was able to get off what he was on and start a different "step down" program. He moved home for a while and withdrew from the from this step-down drug on his own. He got into therapy, regained his strength,

finished his degree and moved to his own apartment. He is now married to a beautiful woman I'm proud to call my daughter-in-law. Love works.

Jesus never condemned the sinners with whom he associated and interacted. He pointed to the problem, but never preached to them, never excluded them, never banished them, never disowned them from the circle of love and humanity in which he walked and taught. They felt seen and heard, included and valued. Love works.

In Huntington, VA there is a program where police and health officials go visit any person who has overdosed within 72 hours of their homecoming. They are not punishing them or shaming them or spying on them. They offer a hand of support and encouragement. They tell them they can change. They are seen and heard, included and valued. They have cut the overdose death rate by 50% just in one year. The initiative sends out Quick Response Teams, or QRT's, who in a spirit of friendship and compassion, help individuals find detox centers, rehabs, programs of support, and jobs. The individuals who used to hate and hide from them, now greet them with hugs and gratitude. The Attorney General has been there to learn what's going on and what works. Love works.

When I first came here and Grace started singing in the choir, she was confronting a very challenging time in her life. She has agreed to tell you a little about it.