

The WISE Jesus

(preached at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Indianapolis, IN, on the morning of January 26, 2020, when the church made the historic vote to be WISE for mental health)

The cover of the February 3, 2020, issue of TIME magazine tells us of the coming YOUTHQUAKE. How the world will change when a new generation leads based on a new book by Charlotte Alter called, *The Ones We've Been Waiting For*.

Reading through the articles I had to re-read this open letter to the elders by Emma Gonzalez, 20 year old Parkland school shooting survivor and gun-violence-prevention advocate. Here is her letter:

“The Youth of this world are watching you destroy our lives before they have begun. We are losing our futures, our sanity and our lives, all because you want more money and more power.

Everyone I know has depression or anxiety or worse. Almost none of us can deal with these illnesses because we can't afford the treatment, and our society has such a stigma against talking about mental health that most of us can't even recognize the symptoms. I watch my friends turn to substance abuse to deal with

their problems, and engage in risky behavior because they don't care about living past 25. This is our reality and it's your fault.

If you are in a position of power, you need to aim to make the world a better place for everyone living here, not just yourself and your donors. That means fewer guns, less plastics, more therapy, more education.”

What if Jesus replied to Emma's open letter...

Emma, thank you for being my disciple. There are many who use my name and do not follow my teachings. Even though you don't use my name in your words, I can tell by what you care about that they are the same things that God cares about. A world of peace, a world where all are welcomed, included, supported and engaged in the work of justice.

Maybe like me when I was your age, you find yourself in a world turned up-side-down and you wonder how one person can make a difference. Yet, one person can. You can lead people in the way of nonviolence and peace. Keep speaking up and keep organizing because this is the work of peace.

My heart aches for the emotional and psychological pain that you and other young people are experiencing. I know that God did not intend for the children that God loves to suffer in this way. The world is full of suffering that is not the will of God. When children suffer, God suffers with them.

The depression and anxiety that you speak about, this too, is a matter of justice. I am told that for young people, depression is the leading cause of illness today. This is a sign that we are losing hope.

What we must do is surround our youth with signs of hope. Those in power need to do whatever they can to provide young people hope. And Emma you are right. It is selfishness that has caused the world to turn their backs on young people. Each generation thinks of their own success and survival. Now it is time to secure our future by securing the wellbeing of our children.

Mental health wellness is the foundation of wellbeing. In my ministry, I always included healing elements in my work with people. In fact, part of what it means to be a disciple is to join me in the healing work.

Let me make it clear what I mean when I say healing.

Too many have taken the ministry of healing too far.

Healing comes in many forms, and yes, prayer is a form of healing. But today you have access to modern forms of healing that work in addition to prayer.

If I had the medicines that you now have, I would have given medicine as part of my healing ministry. Healing is about being whole and this comes by looking at spiritual, physical, and psychological wellbeing.

I am angry that some of my disciples today view healing only as spiritual and in so doing, they cause great harm.

God gives us science to illuminate the path to health and wholeness. Let us use everything that we can in order to offering healing and hope to people who are suffering.

I wonder what it would be like if everyone who calls themselves a Christian would join in the ministry of mental health. Then they would be living out this calling of discipleship. Maybe if all the Christians heard this calling to be welcoming, inclusive, supportive and engaged for mental health, maybe then our youth might have more hope.

If every church worked for mental health justice, then our youth might have better access to more mental health care resources.

If every church became WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged) for mental health, then the church could help bring hope to their communities.

If every single one of my followers understood the biological nature of mental illness and that it is not caused by a character flaw or lack of faith, then the stigma of mental illness would decrease.

If all my disciples affirmed that people living with mental illness are children of God, too, the light would shine in the shadows of stigma, shame and fear.

Emma, I am afraid there is really nothing that I can do now. It is up to my followers. I hope that when you see them, you will talk with them and let them know. If the church is to fight for justice for young people with depression and anxiety, and young people who are turning to substance abuse and risking their lives, then the church must help lead the effort. The church cannot remain silent.

Emma, I agree with you and I hear our Still Speaking God speaking through you as the prophets of old. You remind me of Ezekiel who searched for new life in the valley of dry bones. You are one of God's prophets for today.

What you say is true: "we need positive change and now is the time."

Emma, my prayer is that my disciples will fight for mental health justice.

Do not lose hope and know that you are loved and that you are not defined by your suffering. You are not depression. You are not anxiety. You are a child of God whom God is well pleased.

Also, there is a place to belong, a place to heal, and a place to love that I think you'd really like. It's called First Congregational United Church of Christ in Indianapolis. They are working hard at this change that we want to see in the world and they could use your help, especially their pastor.

Now, there is much more to be said, but I must go now and pray. It's part of how I care for my own mental health. Know you are not alone and you are loved.

May God bless you and keep you. May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God fill your life with hope, joy, love and peace, now and forever. Amen.