A message delivered by Jake Bradshaw

at Lawrence Park Community Church

Sunday June 9, 2019

My Journey With Mental Illness

• Before I start my talk I wanted to give 2 disclaimers

1. I’m pretty nervous to speak to all of you today § The reason I’m telling you this is because admitting it often calms my nerves – I seem to have a love/hate relationship with public speaking.

2.While I still deal with my mental illness every day, I’m doing much better now than I was in the fall of 2017 § For this reason, it’s sometimes hard for me to remember what it was like when I was in the depths of my depression § That being said, when I was writing this talk, I did my best to think back to that time in my life so that I could speak to all of you in a genuine way.

• Last summer I reached out to John to ask if I could speak at church about my experience with mental illness • At the time I had just started a podcast called “Why Me?” and I was determined to share what I had learned with others • I felt that I had so many valuable things to say and my goal was to be an “influencer” or thought leader in the mental health space • Today my goals have changed • While I still believe I can add value to the mental health conversation, I have also realized that a lot of other people have recovered from mental illness and that the things I’ve learned aren’t necessarily new • I now believe that the best way I can help others is by connecting with them in an honest way just by being myself • So today I’m not going to lecture you • I’m not going to tell you the 10 things you need to do to improve your mental health or why thinking positively will solve all of your problems • I’m not going to do any of that • Instead, I’m going to talk about a couple of things I learned in the hopes that something will be valuable to you, but recognizing that everyone has a different experience and I’m by no means an expert.

• First, I want to talk a little bit about my struggle with mental illness • I was diagnosed with depression back in the summer of 2016, right before I went off to university • At a time in my life where I was supposed to be learning how to be independent and take care of myself, I also had to learn how to battle my depression • It added another layer to my transition to university and during my first year I really struggled • The summer after first year, I got home and was determined to get rid of my depression once and for all • I started doing Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or “CBT”, running every morning, and meditating • The summer ended up passing by relatively quickly with only a few small hiccups • However, when I returned to school for second year my mental health deteriorated rapidly • Everything I experienced in first year came back but with more force, I felt like a failure in all my classes, I was sad, I felt lonely and I was constantly anxious • After only a week and a half of classes I decided I couldn’t do it anymore • I dropped all of my courses and take the semester off • I spent the fall of 2017 at home, healing, reflecting and learning • I met with a variety of people from different backgrounds and asked them questions about how they dealt with life’s toughest challenges • I learned a lot during these few months and I was able to return to Queen’s in January 2018 feeling confident that I had the tools to deal with my depression.

• I’ve been at Queen’s ever since • Of course I still have bad days, as we all do, but the difference is that now I have the knowledge, tools and support system to help me get through them • I am a completely different person that I was back in 2016 and have learned numerous things that have changed my outlook on life • The first thing I learned is that suffering is unavoidable • No matter who you are, how much money you have or what your background is, you cannot escape suffering • We all experience heartbreak, failure, illness, the death of a loved one, and the list goes on but since we all go through this no one is ever alone • While everyone suffers in different ways and not everyone has a mental illness, we all experience some form of suffering in our lives • While this may seem like a depressing reality, I actually take comfort in it because I know that I’m not alone in any suffering I experience • I also know that I should never be ashamed to reach out to others for help because there is a 100% chance that they will suffer in their life as well • A 100% chance • The second thing I learned is that our society seems to have a crippling fear of vulnerability • While I’m not exactly sure why this is, I can imagine it’s because vulnerability isn’t always comfortable • In fact, it’s never really comfortable • Vulnerability can be defined as the “quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally” • It sure doesn’t sound appealing • While being vulnerable can be scary, I started to witness how my vulnerability could help others • I realized that by being vulnerable I could help the people around me feel more comfortable talking about their vulnerabilities.

• This brings me to the third thing I learned • Helping others is rewarding • By talking about my experience, reaching out for help and being vulnerable not only did I help myself, but I helped the people around me • By being open about my struggle with mental illness, I shared the message with all of the people in my life that they could share their vulnerabilities with me • I saw the impact this had as I noticed those around me becoming more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings • Witnessing this change and being able to help others who were struggling was rewarding • It’s given me a sense of purpose and improved my own mental health • The fourth thing I learned was that often the little things make a big difference • There were times where I was anxious the entire day and there were days where I didn’t want to get out of bed • On these days I was so grateful for just 5 minutes of peace • I was so thankful to escape my thoughts by laughing with friends, hearing the birds chirp on a sunny afternoon, sliding under my sheets at the end of the day and having dinner with my family • I cherished all of these moments and they brought me a lot of joy.

• This takes me to my last point, I gained a new appreciation for life • Life can be really really, really, really, hard and there have been times where I’ve felt that I was in a deep dark tunnel and I was never getting out • But I did, and I am more grateful for the way I feel now after I’ve been in that tunnel • Before I talk more about how my experience gave me a new appreciation for life, I want to acknowledge that a lot of people suffer greater tragedies than mine, greater than I can even imagine • What I have to say may not be relevant for such people • To those of you who are experiencing this kind of deep suffering I want to say that “I hear you and I’m sorry. I hope you find a way to endure” • We all have ups and downs and there’s a tendency to cherish the ups and avoid the downs • But the challenging times are what make the good times so great • I have a completely new life philosophy now and I enjoy seeking out new opportunities to challenge myself because I know that suffering is necessary in order to experience the good • I would rather live a life that is full of bumps because to me that’s what living is • If you avoid the ups you avoid the downs and I would rather feel joy and pain as supposed to nothing at all.

• So even though I have a love/hate relationship with public speaking and was nervous to speak in front of all of you today, I did it because I knew that I would feel glad afterwards • Thank you to John for helping me craft my sermon and thank you to all of you for listening.