

“One compelling lesson evident in Keefe’s unsettling memoir is that the scars of childhood bullying, abuse, and neglect linger for a lifetime. Another is that even one hospitable minister, teacher, counselor, or especially in her case an ordinary faith community, can make all the difference in rescuing and revitalizing that wounded child and child-within. In an era of relentless headlines of anxiety and despair, *The Lifesaving Church* arrives on the scene as a welcome—and welcoming—witness to perseverance and hope.”

— Robert C. Dykstra, professor, Princeton Theological Seminary

“*The Lifesaving Church* is a powerful book about suicide prevention that every church leader needs to read. Through compelling and courageous storytelling, followed by practical steps that you can do today, this book is a guide that will help churches fulfill their mission to save lives.”

— Sarah Griffith Lund, First Congregational Church of Indianapolis and author of *Blessed Are the Crazy*

“Keefe has offered us a fearless telling of her own story of struggle and hope, of pain and healing, and of betrayal and redemption. She has used her experiences of suicidal thoughts (and an attempt), a persistent eating disorder, and a deep ‘psychache’ to weave a theology of the Church and its purpose of saving lives. Her story serves as both a spiritual and practical guide to congregations as they seek to be a healing and hopeful presence to all they serve, especially those struggling with suicide, addictions, and a sense of separation from God, neighbor, and self. The book includes practical suggestions as well as multiple resources in the appendices.”

— Christie Cozad Neuger, professor emerita, Brite Divinity School.

“Keefe courageously tells her story of pain and woundedness and the miracle of transformation that she found in her faith community. This is not just her story. She provides several concrete suggestions for mental health ministry and congregational care. She offers options for preventing and responding to suicide that move beyond platitudes or clichés. She is witness to Christ’s promise that exposing her wounds to her faith community, the Body of Christ, will lead to redemption. Once redeemed, Keefe’s pain became wisdom. She has been able to use her personal flaws as tools to understand and offer healing and compassionate space to others.”

— David W. McMillan, clinical and community psychologist

“This book weaves the power of Keefe’s personal story with theological and psychological wisdom. Suicidal behavior, self-harm, eating disorder, depression, and adverse (abusive and neglected) childhood experiences are realities that connect with her experience of the embodied love of God. This book breaks the silence with her honesty and the depth of her faithfulness and guides faith communities to embody the unconditional love of the divine. ‘God is not a fan of suicide,’ is a wallop of grace that engages us in the conversation.”

— Alan Johnson, United Church of Christ Mental Health Network

“Keefe offers a timely and relevant introduction to what it means to be mindful and attentive to the realities of suicide in our midst. This is an aspect of ministry that has certainly been under addressed. She shares her personal journey, which has involved suicidal realities as well as gender realities, to alert communities of faith to their critical role in responding to people who may be overlooked in their day-to-day living. Her brave revelations of her journey toward healing can be a needed inspiration to those who think they are alone in their life situations. Her voice throughout her narration is particularly powerful. She weaves personal reflections with theological insights to provide hope for those struggling with similar issues. Because she speaks from personal experience, her confession is compelling and inspiring for others who may be dealing with all too similar situations. Particularly helpful are her appendices, which give practical instruction for those dealing with issues of suicide. Her wisdom is instructive for counseling families and friends affected by suicidal relations. Also helpful are her keen insights into the faith and psychological dynamics that are a part of suicidal realities.”

— Sharon Thornton, professor emerita, Andover Newton Theological School and author of *Broken Yet Beloved*

“At last, a healthy, soul-stirring resource for starting a conversation about suicide in the church! Through a courageous personal testimony, Keefe reminds us that no one is outside of God’s reach, and calls the church to return to the heart of its DNA as an institution of love and radical acceptance. Keefe proves that vulnerability and raw truth telling, coupled with professional insight and genuine unconditional love, is our only hope if we truly are to become *The Lifesaving Church*.”

— Angela Whitenhill, Mental Health Initiative manager, National Benevolent Association (Christian Church/Disciples of Christ)

THE LIFESAVING CHURCH

FAITH COMMUNITIES AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

RACHAEL A. KEEFE

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*To the Rev. John Hall, without whom my story could not be told.
Words are insufficient to express my gratitude for the decades of
listening, caring, mentoring, and friendship that
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prevention, intervention, and postvention. Their responses helped shape the content of this book.

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Preface

This isn't a book about suicide so much as it is about suicide prevention. It's about what can happen when the Church, the Body of Christ, actually embodies the love of Christ and saves lives. This book is also more than that. It is my story, my remembering of my own experiences of suicidality, suicidal behaviors, and romancing of death. The details of this story are now filtered through my decades of experience as a pastor, as well as my years as a therapist and a clinical chaplain. Life and ministry have shaped and reshaped my self-understanding and have, no doubt, shifted things in my memory as I have grown more fully into myself.

I don't write this book because I think I have all the answers. I write to engage in conversation with you. Suicide seems to be one of the last taboos of the church. It makes most of us anxious when someone talks about suicide. Requests for prayers for a loved one who is hospitalized for suicidal behavior are nearly whispered—if they are spoken out loud at all. People often shy away from survivors of suicide loss because they are uncomfortable and don't know what to say. And those who might want prayers—let alone tangible, embodied care for their own struggles with suicidality—often don't dare to ask. There's so much silence around suicide in the church that it is quite literally killing us, though we are supposed to be a people of abundant life.

The church is a community bound together for life through the love of Christ. It is the Body of Christ, a whole, rather than separate individuals. When describing the struggle of individuals within the church, I frequently say, "As with one, so with all." If one member of the church is mentally ill, the Body of Christ is mentally ill. If one member is disabled, the Body of Christ

is disabled. If one member has cancer, the Body of Christ has cancer...and so on, down the line...including suicidality. If one member of the church is suicidal, then the Body of Christ is suicidal, hence my chapter titles: "The Body of Christ Is Suicidal," "The Body of Christ Holds Secrets and Shame," "The Body of Christ Is Resilient," "The Body of Christ Is Broken and Whole," "The Body of Christ Is a Lifesaver," and so forth.

Jesus asks us to carry one another's burdens. How better to do this than to assume responsibility for healing the Body of Christ?

Chapter 7

The Body of Christ Is a Lifesaver

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

—Ephesians 4:25

After I “came out” and experienced such profound rejection by the church, I tried to leave it. Always, I was pulled back in because I had come to believe that God loved me even if the church did not. Sometimes it was very hard to hold onto a sense of God’s love for me. Once, I was asked to be a short-term interim for a congregation that had already rejected my application to be their settled pastor. Another time, a search committee chose me to be their candidate for settled pastor only to have the church be packed with inactive members who went so far as to say, “She’s a good preacher and probably a good pastor, but we don’t want her because she’s gay.” They were so steadfast in their convictions that my family and I had to be escorted out of the building for our own safety.

One of the worst things any congregation can do is cause harm to an individual in the name of God. I’ve never understood how churches can justify messages of hatred and condemnation when they claim to be followers of Christ. Yet, so many churches feel justified in judging, condemning, and casting out individuals and whole groups of people for perceived sins. I wonder how many lives have been lost because a congregation has acted hatefully

and claimed to do so on God's behalf. How many people have died by suicide believing that God hates them because the church told them so?

As previously mentioned, during the decade after I came out, I was unable to find a permanent fulltime call to parish ministry. While I do not regret the years I spent as a therapist and as the gathering pastor of Promise Church, the pain I experienced during those years was unnecessary. We, too often, make the mistake of forgetting that the church is made up of human beings and, as such, sometimes gets things wrong. The church has been wrong in its reaction to LGBTQ+ people, to people with mental illness, to perpetrators and victims of domestic violence, to people with developmental disabilities, and many others, including women and persons living with HIV/AIDS. I feel deep pain when I think of how many people have been turned away from church and told they are unworthy, unwanted, unloved. This is not embodying Christ. This is not saving lives.

It's time the church stopped worshipping its own peculiar interpretations of the Bible and resumed worshipping the Living Word. Dorothy Soelle suggests that Jesus has many followers and few friends.¹ She also describes Jesus, and those who would be his friends, as *goel* (witness-redeemer). This is the job of the church, the Body of Christ: to bear witness to suffering and create space for healing and redemption. Anytime one who claims the name of Christ yet acts without love, anytime a church rejects or condemns, then they are not embodying Christ. If it is not love, then it is not the way of Christ.

When I was 15 and actively suicidal, no one knew that I was thinking about killing myself for a long time before the day I acted on impulse and swallowed a bunch of pills. It's easy for me to say in hindsight that someone should have known something and done something to get me help, but in those days no one talked openly about depression, eating disorders, or abuse. How was anyone to know what was going in my head if I could not tell them? The important thing is that when people found out, especially church people, they did everything they knew how to do to communicate their love and support of me. No one told me

1 Dorothy Soelle, *Choosing Life* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

I was going to hell for wanting to die. No one told me to “just get over it.” They offered only love and support. Granted, they had no idea how to respond as my eating disorder became worse, but what they did was welcome me when I showed up. In John’s case, he continued to meet with me regularly to try to understand and to help bear my pain.

It was this early experience of church being church at its best that led me to ordained ministry. It was also what held me through the years of rejection by the same church that ordained me. I had learned that church at its best is the embodiment of Christ’s love, and that church at its worst is an embodiment of every human fear. It has been the source of healing and the source of pain for me. It’s another instance of both/and, and it has taken me a long time to come to terms with that. The truth of the matter is that the church can be very godly and bring healing. It can also be incredibly self-righteous and bring pain. In either case, the church is people doing their best to embody the Christ they know. Sometimes, the Christ of the church is far too small, and much more a reflection of the fearful souls who gather there than an embodiment of Christ’s largesse.

Even so, as church membership continues to dwindle, we cannot continue to ignore the gospel call. It’s a simple one, really: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk. 12:31, Mt. 22:39). Or, put more directly: as Jesus said to his disciples, “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn. 13:34–35). The mandate of scripture is clear: we are to care for one another, especially those who are vulnerable and cannot care for themselves. This is the true work of the church. Yes, we need to worship to remind ourselves that God is God and we are not, and to express our gratitude for the blessings we receive each day. Yes, we need to study the Scriptures so that the Word continues to come alive and challenge us. However, if we are not engaged in caring for the most vulnerable among us, then we are not doing the work of Christ.

I doubt that the church in Hyannis understood their care for me as embodying Christ or doing Christ’s work. They did what they did because I was a child of that church. They knew me and they cared and they did not want to see me in pain. I wonder how many others they have saved and how many others, whom

they did not know, walked out of their doors and into their own unbearable pain. It's time we stop worrying about who's a member and who is not, and reach outside our sanctuaries to bring healing where it is needed. We can all be better neighbors—which brings us back to creating community that clearly demonstrates everyone belongs and everyone is loved.

The True Power of the Gospel

When I worked at the psychiatric hospital, one of the most common questions people asked me was, “How does God feel about suicide?” Without exception, the people asking wanted to kill themselves, but were afraid that God would condemn them for it. It did not matter what I thought about God's view of suicide, what mattered was the person asking the question. My answer to this question is, “God is not a fan of suicide.” Often, I had to explain this, because someone wanting to kill themselves wants evidence. They believe that their life is their own and they can do with it as they want. If I thought otherwise, I had to prove it. Depression, psychosis, PTSD, or psychache often convince the sufferer that the world would be better off without them in it. It is hard to break through this illusion created by pain. However, I continued to engage each of these persons in conversation that went something like this:

Me: Do you believe that God created life?

Patient: Yes.

Me: Do you believe that God gave you the gift of your life?

Patient: Yes. But I don't like it and I don't want it anymore.

Me: Do you want to tell God that God's gift to you isn't good enough?

Patient: Well, no.

Me: Then you see what I mean when I say that God is not a fan of suicide?

Patient: Yes. God wants me to keep the life I have.

Me: Right. Should we talk about ways of dealing with the pain so you don't want to die?

Patient: I guess...

My own personal belief about God and suicide is not relevant when I am attempting to save a life and offer hope. Many mainline Protestants are quick to jump in with reassurance that God loves and forgives everyone, no matter what. On the other hand, many Catholics and more conservative Protestants tend to believe that if a person dies by suicide, they are damned. This belief harkens back to days before psychology gave us insight into the many ways in which the human mind can be tortured. Even the official stance of the Catholic Church is one that leans toward mercy.² However, to one contemplating suicide, belief that they will “go to hell” may be the only thing stopping them from suicide. Until other protective factors—belonging to a community, feeling loved, recognizing one’s own value—can be strengthened, it is unwise to change this belief.

Yet it is equally foolish to allow survivors of suicide loss to hold tightly to the belief of God’s condemnation. There is no biblical evidence that those who die by suicide are condemned to eternity away from God’s presence. There are seven instances of suicide in the Bible³ and not one of them mentions God’s response. Any theology that claims absolute surety of God’s response bases its claim on conjecture. One who suffers the loss of a loved one to suicide is potentially at risk for suicide themselves if they believe that their loved one will be alone in hell forever. In this situation, I always point out God’s acts of love and mercy and suggest the possibility that God will be understanding and merciful toward their loved one. However, there is no way of knowing. Those of us who believe in a loving, merciful God err on the side of

2 Paragraphs 2282 and 2283 of Part 3, Chapter 2, Article 5 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* state respectively: “Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide,” and, “We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.” http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm

3 Biblical references to suicide: Abimelech (Judg. 9:54), Samson (Judg. 16:30), Saul (1 Chron. 10:4), Saul’s armor-bearer (1 Chron. 10:5), Ahithophel (2 Sam. 17:23), Zimri (1 Kings 16:18), and Judas (Mt. 27:5).

forgiveness, grace, and peace. Those of us who believe in a God who passes judgment err on the side of condemnation. This is why, when asked, I always say, diplomatically, that God is not a fan of suicide. Everything I know about God says that God's heart is broken anytime anyone takes their own life, whatever the circumstances.

When the church saved my life at 15, I thought I would always have a safe place. When the church rejected me at 31, I wondered whether I would ever feel safe again. Years of heartache passed before I could see that God rejoices when we embody love for one another, and God's own heart breaks when we fail. Contemplating the heart of God always leads me to the communion table.

Jesus was intimately acquainted with humanity's capacity for betrayal and nonetheless he gathered with his friends and disciples in that upper room. He ate with them, laughed with them, cried with them, sang with them, and prayed with them. Then he *offered himself* to them, in spite of—or, because of—what would follow. “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood, the new covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.” We hear these words. Yet we do not actually *hear* them. There is no one for whom Christ's body was not broken; remember that Judas was at that table in the upper room. No one is excluded from the new covenant that binds us with forgiveness in communities of love. Yet we often fail to hear the message of inclusion, forgiveness, and grace!

Spirituality, Religion, and Healing the Psychache

“There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul”⁴ is one of my favorite lines from the old hymns. Jesus is the balm that heals the pain of sin. Today, the church is the embodiment of Christ. Today, the church is the balm that heals the pain of sin and psychache. We are often blind to this power we have in our midst. The power that raised Christ from the dead that first Easter morning, that set holy heads on fire on Pentecost, and that gathered followers of the Way is the very same power that

4 “There Is a Balm in Gilead” is a traditional African American Spiritual of unknown authorship.

creates and sustains the church today. We, as the church, have the power to save lives, maybe even pull them from the grips of death. I know this to be true because it is my story. You've read it in these pages. Moreover, I am not the only one who can tell this kind of story that moves from the hell of the void and the pain of psychache into the joyful life of the Spirit. Will we remember whose we are when we gather each week to worship, to pray, to sing praises to God? And will we re-member those who are left out of our kinship? *If we are not sharing the power of the Spirit to save lives, we are not church.*

Somewhere in my family's photo albums there is a picture of me at age eight or nine. I am reaching up to the sky as if to shake God's hand. My parents and others often asked what I was doing in the picture, and I never told them. When it was taken, I was at a party given by friends of my father. They were baptizing people in their pool, but would not baptize me. They told me, kindly enough, that I had already been baptized and already belonged to God. The man who took my picture told me that all I had to do was reach up and take God's hand. I did reach up. I just had no idea that God took my hand—had, in fact, *already* been holding it. It took me a lifetime to be comfortable in God's strong, wounded, beautiful hands. Longer, still, before I realized that my hands were also strong, wounded, and beautiful, and could be used to save lives.

It's hard in a society that wants easy, comfortable answers. If we feel badly, we want a pill to fix it. If we pray, we want instant answers. If we are sick, we want immediate cures. We are impatient and we have forgotten the joy of an intimate relationship with God. We want spirituality without the trappings of religion. While I agree that church can be far too heavy-handed with its dogma and doctrine, spirituality that isn't anchored in any faith tradition often leaves a person floating out in the universe, feeling disconnected and without a sense of belonging. In addition, without faith, psychache can flourish.

We, as human beings, need faith communities. I am clearly Christian, so I will say we need church. Studies have shown that people who are active in faith communities have better health outcomes. They live longer. They recover more quickly from

illness. They are happier with their quality of life.⁵ People have become skeptical of religion because churches have clung to traditions and theologies that predate science and technology. If we want to be the lifesaving communities we were intended to be, then we must let go of anything that is not essential for Christian faith in this moment. We must trust the God who led the Israelites through the desert, the God who asked a teenage girl to be the one to bear God into the world, the God who conquered death, the God who led Peter and Paul far beyond any place they could have predicted, the God whose church survives thousands of years later... We must trust this God. We must trust this God to show us how to be the fullest embodiment of Christ we can be, to show us how to be a church that saves lives.

At this point, I would be remiss if I did not say that the church alone, no matter how healthy it is or how fully it embodies Christ, cannot take the place of medical or psychiatric or psychological treatment for one who suffers from mental illness or addictions. Congregations can support wellness and recovery by providing a loving place, a place of acceptance and belonging and inclusion. Sometimes, being a part of a community gives someone courage to reach out for treatment because they know they are loved and supported and valued. Sometimes, knowing that people are praying for you and holding hope for you is enough to keep trying when nothing seems to be helping you to feel better.

While I have mentioned hospitalization, therapy, and spiritual direction along my own journey toward recovery, I haven't said anything about medication. The summer I was at Boston Children's hospital for eating disorder treatment, I was prescribed an antidepressant, and I had an adverse reaction to two different types. While I was in my thirties, I was again prescribed an antidepressant, and had a bad reaction to that as well. Because of these reactions and other allergies, I've had to find a way to manage the symptoms of depression without benefit of medication. I wouldn't wish this on anyone. Mental illnesses

5 Harold Koenig's work addresses the connection between religious practice and health outcomes with profound clarity. For a summary of his work in this area, see Harold Koenig, Dana King, and Verna B. Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health, 2nd Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

are diseases of the brain, physical illnesses, and ought to be treated as such. The church cannot replace physical or psychiatric treatment for depression and other mental health challenges, but it can make the difference between simply *surviving* and truly *living*.

There is, indeed, a balm in Gilead. It's you and me and the Christ who works in and through us. Together we can become the lifesaving church. We can embody Christ and, in so doing, help prevent suicide.

What Your Congregation Can Do Now:

- Be mindful that saving lives is the primary work of the church.
- Model Christ in the inclusion, welcome, and re-membering of each person who comes in the door.
- Be attentive to the power of the Holy Spirit to lead you in unexpected directions of healing and wholeness.
- Share in the sacred ritual of communion with the understanding that sometimes we sit in Judas' seat, and yet are still welcome at Christ's table (meaning Jesus welcomes all who seek forgiveness and healing in his body, broken, and the cup poured out).
- Continue to educate yourselves on how the congregation can become a lifesaving congregation by understanding better the role congregations play in recovery from mental health challenges as well as in suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. (See Appendix C: Resources for Laypeople.)

To read more, including the resource appendices, order *The Lifesaving Church* by clicking [here](#)