

Six Steps to Healthy Post-Pandemic Church

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Introduction

- By looking at four biblical passages from Matthew, we will explore the various dimensions related to the process of healthy emergence from the pandemic and other challenges we have recently faced.
- Elizabeth Bernstein article in the Wall Street Journal (05/18/21): "A lot of people have been asking me the same question lately: How can I cope with my re-entry anxiety?"

Matthean Stories of Healing

- Matthew 8:1-4 - Man with leprosy, "Make me clean." Jesus touched him and said, "Be clean."
- Matthew 8:28-34 – Two Demon-Possessed men emerge from the tombs.
- Matthew 9:27-31 - Two blind men regain sight from Jesus and spread the news.
- Matthew 8:5-10 - The centurion's faith causes Jesus to heal his servant and behold in wonder.

What is the emotional state of things today?

On May 14, 2021, The Church Times (U.K.) reported on the dramatic increase of clergy seeking mental health referrals. The article stated, "Clergy are now under immense pressure to deliver more than ever before, their traditional ministerial roles being added to by the demand for an ongoing online presence, with correspondingly diminishing financial and human resources. It is hardly surprising that rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout have skyrocketed."

First-Century Religious Impurity

- In her book *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Abuse*, Elaine A Heath states, "Being unclean had physical, spiritual, relational, and communal dimensions"(105). We can add psychological and liturgical.

In *Back to the Well*, Frances Taylor Gench makes three important points about the first century understanding of impurity (42-43):

- 1. Impurity was not sin and was not prohibited.
- 2. Purity did not correspond to social class. Impurity is a fact of life, but not of class.
- 3. Impurity was gender blind.

Matthew 8: 1-4 (ESV)

When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them."

Commentary: Those with leprosy were considered by rabbis to be in a state of physical death. No law prohibited touching people with leprosy, but the disease caused serious ritual impurity. The unholy in proximity with the holy was a problem but unholiness or uncleanness was a fact of life.

Discussion Questions:

- Has our view of uncleanness changed considering the pandemic?

Matthew 8:28 – 31 (ESV)

And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.”

Commentary: The unclean, demon-possessed men living in tombs (an unclean place). They are violent, dangerous men (isolated and social-distanced). Jesus sends the demons into pigs (unclean animals). The town people become afraid of Jesus. The story is about the isolated and feared other and redemption versus the economic loss due to God’s action of mercy and healing.

Discussion Question (Spiritual):

- What are some of the issues of spiritual uncleanness?

Matthew 8:28 – 31 (ESV)

Discussion Questions (Psychological):

- How are the spiritual dimensions different from the psychological issues and where might they overlap?
- What psychological factors tend to isolate people and make them angry?
- What are some of the ways people can help ameliorate these factors?

Matthew 9:27-31 (ESV)

And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." When he entered the house, the blind men came to him, and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith be it done to you." And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, "See that no one knows about it." But they went away and spread his fame through all that district.

Discussion Questions:

- How can a community improve mental health of its members? What is the role of healthy relationships with respect to mental health? What can we do to maintain and improve healthy communities and relationships?

Matthew 8:5-10 (ESV)

When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." And he said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."

Discussion Questions:

- What are some opportunities that can help people feel more comfortable in the pews? How can church leaders help people when they become anxious or worried about church attendance.

Conclusion

A central hallmark of a healthy church is wonder.

In "gathering those driven away," Wendy Farley states, "The restoration of wonder is the beginning of the inward journey toward a God who people of faith aver is always waiting in the seeker's heart (224).

Thank You!

- For more information about mental health and suicide prevention go to www.afsp.org. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has local chapters throughout the country that are ready to help you and your congregation with educational material and other support.
- Bob is available for retreats, adult forums and guest preaching throughout the fall and early winter 2021. Please contact him at bob@robertdflanagan.com to discuss your parish's needs and potential dates.