

Mid-Week reflection “A Tale of Two Pandemics” June 2, 2020

My mid-week reflections and sermons have largely been exploring spiritual practices and theology by which people might remain rooted in a good space. This has been a pastoral endeavor. Part of the pastoral, for Jesus however, is prophetic ministry. Jesus addressed and confronted systems that exploited and underserved the most vulnerable. Jesus chose to do this, so we who call ourselves his followers will at some point need to wade into these waters. The title of this reflection is “A Tale of Two Pandemics” and comes from a broadcast of *Greater Boston* (a news show on PBS), and it seemed to capture the sentiments I have been pondering.¹ I offer these illustrations to raise congregational and personal compassion which could impact our thoughts, conversations, and larger systems.

For example, throughout this COVID-19 season I have continued to receive my full salary. I have strived to meet my pastoral responsibilities through e-mail, telephone, audio recordings, ZOOM, and even Canada Post. Such has not been the case for everyone. When coffee shops and restaurants closed, the wait staff were furloughed. When manufacturing ceased, the labour force went home and the checks stopped coming. In an interview with former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich, he noted that 50-60% of middle to upper-income employees could fulfill their duties from home whereas only 3% of those in the lower income brackets have been able to do so.² CERB payments have been a poor substitute for work, several young adults in my life have reflected.³ It is a tale of two pandemics.

I was visiting with a middle-aged woman a week back (not from NPMC) who is now teaching from home; she is married with two school age children. They are all under the same roof these days and it isn't a large house. While her partner continues his responsibilities from the home office, she gets to use the kitchen table. The kids come to her with their questions, their appetites, their need for attention. Quite suddenly she is day time parent AND teacher. She noted that too many of her female teacher friends in such circumstances deal with similar dynamics. Is this not a case of sexism? It is a tale of two pandemics.

Personal Protective Equipment: It was horrifying to watch the bidding war among various U.S. states for PPE—wealthier states got the precious resources while other states had to wait. If this pattern follows on the world stage, and I think it already has, poorer nations or nations not on the “correct” geo-political side will get inadequate or no PPE. As a result, more of their health care workers and residents will perish. It is a tale of two pandemics.

¹ <https://www.wgbh.org/news/national-news/2020/05/28/greater-boston-full-show-05-27-20>

² See more in the interview or in his 2020 book: *The System: Who Rigged it, and How We Fix It*.

³ For a counter perspective on the effect of CERB see Tom Blackwell's editorial “Labour shortage amid Depression-level unemployment: Businesses struggle to hire back workers getting CERB”; *StarPhoenix*, Friday, May 29.

Water and food: I have been directed by all our health officials to regularly wash my hands. Not all Canadians have access to clean water; nor do many who live in the poorest boroughs of cities worldwide; nor do those in refugee camps. If and when COVID-19 comes to these locations a person can only imagine the carnage which will follow. Diet is no different. Not all people have financial access or even plain access to healthy food. When pop is cheaper than milk and chips cheaper than lettuce (if lettuce is to be found) and a person has a limited budget, that person might choose the soda and chips. Such a diet contributes to COVID-19 vulnerability. Black Americans, it is reported, are dying at twice the rate of white Americans for some of these reasons. It is a tale of two pandemics.

Elkhart County, location of my seminary, is listed in the top 15 of potential sites for the next COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S.⁴ The “high-risk” rating, speculation goes among my Elkhart connections, is two-fold: Latinos and the Amish. Latinos comprise a large part of the work force in the factories of Elkhart County and they are coming into the shop even when displaying COVID-19 like symptoms. They can not afford to miss a pay-check and can not afford to be fired (they have no CERB), so they go to their jobs and spread the virus. The Amish resist self-isolation, and the Amish have a significant presence in Elkhart County. The barn does get raised nor the sheep shorn nor God worshipped on your own in an Amish world. Financially burdened households and socially inter-dependant communities are particularly vulnerable these days. It is a tale of two pandemics.

I could continue reflecting on the manner in which the youngest and oldest Canadians have not fared well,⁵ but one gets the idea. We can and should be grateful for the good steps which have been taken in the COVID- 19 era. This does not preclude, however, considering the ways in which systems and power have made this pandemic season even a greater strain on life for some. Policy is often created by those with access to power, and those are not typically the marginalized and vulnerable of society. May compassion help shape our systems.

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Questions for reflection and discussion:

- Do you know people for whom COVID-19 has made life more challenging?
- Are there policies or procedures which might have made their situation more tolerable?

⁴<https://abc57.com/news/new-data-reveals-elkhart-as-next-covid-19-hotspot>

⁵ The youngest: why were there early re-opening plans for golf courses, bars, and boat launches open while libraries and playgrounds have low priority; is it related to the interests of those making policy? The eldest: note the debacle within Ontario care homes directly related to the absence of livable wages and governmental oversight.