

October 15, 2020

Trinity Musings #26: Rev Brian Goodings (notincontactwithmany@Trinity United Church: Collingwood)

If you were expecting one, but haven't yet had a call from the Brass Rail strip club in Toronto, you can relax. If you haven't heard that story, after one of their employees tested positive for Covid-19, the business sprang into action to contact all the patrons who have given them their names and phone numbers. Turned out the list was almost completely bogus. Go figure.

If you are a patron of joints like that, you might not want to put that new Contact Tracing App on your phone.

Premier Doug is encouraging us to install it as a way to stop or limit the spread of the virus. If someone is diagnosed with Covid-19, "they" can use the App to contact everyone with whom the infected person had been in prolonged contact, for the previous two weeks.

Sounds like a good idea in principal, but like all communicable diseases, Covid-19 has an air of shame about it too.

In the past, the majority of experiences we've had with using these kinds of medical-forensics is to trace the spread of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD). The infected person was obligated by law, to provide the medical practitioner a list of names of past-partners. These conversations, sometimes, were VERY secretive and often/always awkward. I'm sure there was a lot of blaming and shaming involved too.

Having Covid-19 shouldn't really be shameful but it feels like it is. Names of infected people are kept in strict confidence.

All we would know, if we are phoned by the Covid-police is that "someone" we've been with lately has the virus. Names are withheld. So everyone is suspect.

We will likely blame people we don't really know, first.

I was in line at a grocery store last week and a middle aged woman standing in line with us, was coughing and hacking, really frequently and loudly.

From what I saw in the eyes and body language of those around her, none of us felt much, if any, kindness towards her-very-sick-sounding-self. There was a lot of tisking and “good-lords” and muttering as we collectively judged her as unclean. Nobody was sympathetic and neither did anyone ask if she needed help or was ok. We just glared in our collective condemnation.

Perhaps she shouldn't really have been in line but I suspect she had asthma or something that didn't threaten us at all. Maybe we should have given her the benefit of believing that if she really had something that was contagious, she wouldn't have gone to the store? She may well have grown tired of explaining her medical condition to everyone and just didn't feel like telling us what was going on.

Do we think that maybe she should have been wearing a sign? Has it come to this?

Modern versions of “Leprosy” goes by many names and we are quick to isolate others if we feel threatened. Our first instinct, as in Biblical times, is to cast them out as UNCLEAN and no longer welcome in the wider community.

I remember when AIDS was first diagnosed and we all ran from the people who were ill. A very young friend of mine who had become infected through blood transfusions was put into isolation and nobody could touch or visit her because of fear of infection. She died all alone in a hermetically sealed hospital room. Her family just watched her die from behind a window.

My fear is that the Contact Tracing App, because of the shame associated with being ill, is going to result in a lot of blaming and misplaced suspicion.

Anonymity often compels us to search for “the guilty”, on our own. Ever heard someone say, “They gave me their cold”? This is a conclusion we make to satisfy our need to affix blame, without any scientific proof at all.

I know this is a bit of blue sky dreaming but, if we could move away from the shaming and blaming illness brings, we might all take better care of

each other and be less fearful that we too might someday be “cast into the fiery pit”.

The last thing any of us need, if we become ill, is to be thrown out and made to feel unclean and guilty.

There may be a number of reckless people who pass diseases without regard for others, but I believe they are really very few in number.

In Post Covid time (yep it will come), going to work, obviously ill, will no longer be seen as heroic. That will be a very good change for everyone.

Most of us, if we pass on a virus, do so quite unintentionally and we need to remember that viruses are incredibly well adapted to jumping from one person to another. They are a very clever and clandestine entity that moves between us, usually undetected.

Maybe there could be another Contact App that could be used to let people know that someone they spent time with recently is ill and needs care?

It would also be reassuring to know that if we become ill, we too will be cared for and supported by our community, not rejected.

That's the kind of Contact I would appreciate going viral.