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Trinity Musings #32: from Rev Brian Goodings trinityminister@bmts.com
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Brace yourself...I take drugs. Since the Covid-spring, I've been taking a mild anti-depressant ("mild" brings less shame than "strong"?), an antihistamine for my allergies, a puff from my puffer for asthma and sometimes, on the very odd occasion I remember, a baby aspirin. Some days I also take Ibuprofen (vitamin "I" for old dudes) and Tylenol.

Should I feel shame for admitting that I use these medications that help me get through the day? Do you think less of me? Am I weaker than you thought?

I get all these drugs at my local pharmacy and when I pick them up everyone is pleasant and nobody wags their finger at me. Most of them are even covered by my senior's drug plan.

Can you imagine what it would be like to have to get these drugs from a person in an alley who secretly made them and sold them to me for maximum profit? Walter White and Jesse Pinkman (Breaking Bad) might have been good chemists but they are probably pretty rare in their attention to making "quality stuff". If a drug is being made illegally, it's unlikely anyone is too concerned about hygiene and purity of the ingredients.

It's probably safe to say that, most people use drugs. Coffee, tea and alcohol are pretty much universally acceptable drugs and it is not rare now to hear people in their 70's and 80's debating what they believe are the "best" levels of THC and CBD in cannabis.

Funny to think that, even three years ago, marijuana was thought of as a drug for hippies and addicts. Now it's more than ok and part of polite society.

But many drugs, that used to keep easy company with "weed"/"grass"/"mary-jane" smokers are still shrouded with shame.

These include drugs like nicotine, heroin, fentanyl, crystal-meth, cocaine, oxycodone and benzodiazepines. Most started out as totally acceptable and legal drugs, created by the pharmaceutical industry to alleviate pain

and suffering. They are so good at creating euphoric feelings that, for some, life is **simply unbearable** without them. According to the literature, they are so perfectly engineered to do what they do that some people become addicts after one dose. That's scary.

I recently heard about a former firefighter who died all alone from a fentanyl overdose. His addiction started after taking a 30 pill prescription for oxycodone after his wisdom teeth were removed. He lost his job, family and home, and finally his life to his addiction. He was, according to his friends, not a bad guy, just unable to quit. So he bought his drugs on the street from illegal dealers who laced the last batch he bought, with too much fentanyl.

The tough love approach does not cure the addiction or help the addict, but instead, creates a world of criminality.

Users often become criminals to support their habit and dealers and producers kill each other and bystanders in turf wars for control of the vastly lucrative illegal drug trade.

The best way to put a stick in this wheel of tragedy is to decriminalize all drugs and provide a safe supply and help for addicts.

Sounds like a crazy idea after so many years of declaring a "War on Drugs" and thinking of them as the evil enemy, but the War was lost a long time ago. People use drugs that sometimes start out as very helpful but can, in time and over usage, become very harmful. I know first-hand the power of addiction from nicotine.

It's time, instead, to take a harm reduction approach.

Around twenty years ago Portugal decided to decriminalize all drugs and provide a safe supply and help for addicts. The results have been very positive. Drug use has actually gone down dramatically and many addicts have been helped to quit or reduce their usage. Many of them are actually able to function quite well, have jobs and families and contribute to society.

The burden and cost on the criminal justice system has been very significantly reduced and violent crimes related to the illegal drug trade have all but disappeared.

Last month Oregon decriminalized most drugs and has started an aggressive campaign to help, not jail, people. They hope to have positive results comparable to Portugal. I applaud their courage and foresight.

Although we are all deeply concerned with deaths from Covid right now, did you know that there will likely be around 2500 people who die from opioid overdoses in Ontario this year? The majority of those who will die are between the ages of 30 and 60 years old and many, if not most of them, became addicted after taking a prescribed drug from a doctor.

That's 8 people a day...who, except with regard to the specific drugs we use, really aren't much different than me, and probably, you. The truth is that all of us could become addicted to deadly drugs, given the wrong circumstances.

The real tragedy comes from the pain and loneliness of not talking about it because we are afraid of being shamed. Maybe it's time we broke the deadly silence on this topic. We really are in this together.