

## **A Healing Church for Hurting People**

Over the years as both a priest and a lawyer, I have assisted lawyers cope with personal challenges such as loneliness, suicide, depression, divorce, burnout, and alcohol and drug abuse. We may think of lawyers as stoic and unflappable, but they are facing a loneliness epidemic and need increased mental health and wellness intervention.

Let me give you one example of a female attorney I met several ago. She is a civil litigator. When she was not caring for her small children, she was driving long hours in her car to go to depositions, making court appearances, and researching cases. There were people everywhere she went, and yet she always felt alone.

She told me, “I could be crammed into a room with other lawyers. I could be seeing the same faces repeatedly, having polite conversations and still feel lonely.” She just could not let her guard down. “The reality is when you are a litigator,” she said, “everyone is an adversary, and you must keep your guard up. You must remind yourself, ‘These are not my friends.’”

Lawyers are not the only ones suffering from loneliness. In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared a public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in the country. He warned about health consequences such as increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and dementia, along with premature death.

Even the most popular entertainment personalities have suffered from loneliness, the most prominent was Elvis Presley. Elvis was a superstar, one of the most revered figures in the entertainment industry. And yet, he was a very lonely man who had suffered a failed marriage, had few real friends, was mishandled by his manager, and became addicted to prescription pills because of his inability to sleep at night. When not performing, he was often alone in his hotel suite, sad, depressed, and feeling deeply alone.

In December 1976 Elvis was performing at the Las Vegas Hilton. Like so many other nights, Elvis could not sleep. By his bedside was pen and paper, and so this night he wrote down some very personal thoughts and then threw the paper into the waste basket. He wrote: “I feel so alone sometimes. The night is quiet for me. I’d love to be able to sleep. I am glad that everyone is gone now. I’ll probably not rest. I have no need for all of this. Help me, Lord.”

Elvis was in pain, and there was no one to comfort him. Most of us can identify with Elvis. We have all been there at one time or another. Sometimes problems overwhelm us which we cannot bear by ourselves. We can feel anxious, stressed out, at our wits’ end. Our physical and mental health may fail, and eventually we may even give up on life.

We all have problems, don’t we? Problems are as varied as people, and problems result in pain. How do we deal with the pain caused by our problems? Pretend it doesn’t exist?

Keep a stiff upper lip? Try to escape through alcohol or drugs or sex? None of that will work. Here's the truth: if you don't deal with your pain, your pain will deal with you. It will sap the joy right out of your life.

What you and I need is healing, but none of us can heal ourselves, which is why we need Jesus. Make no mistake about it. Jesus came to heal the hurt out of our lives. The word "salvation" has the connotation in the original Greek of meaning "healing and fulfillment." Jesus wants to save you, but he also wants to heal your hurt.

However, Jesus won't heal us without our cooperation. Healing is a choice. We must want to be healed and made whole. God will not act if we don't act. "Choose life" our lesson from Deuteronomy says to us. God sets before us life and death, blessings, and curses. We have the freedom to choose, but God beckons us, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

To choose Jesus is to choose life because Jesus was a healer. Preaching, teaching, and healing were his ministries. Mark 1:39 we read: "Jesus went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons." Matthew 4:23 tells us that Jesus went about Galilee "healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people." Just to make sure we get the message Matthew repeats that verse in Chapter 9:35: "And Jesus was going about all the cities and villages... healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness."

If you've got it altogether, then you don't need Jesus. He didn't come for healthy people but for the sick. He came for those "Humpty Dumpty's" of the world – those broken, messed-up people who just can't put all the pieces of their lives back together again.

So often I pray: "Jesus, I've got a problem. It's me." And so often Jesus looks at me and replies: "Gary, I've got the answer. It's me."

I used to think that healing was a ministry of the church, but now I know that healing is the church's ministry. The church exists to heal hurting lives, to restore broken spirits, and to help us become human beings fully alive to God and one another.

A sign over an Italian hotel which once served as a hospital had these words: "To heal sometimes, to comfort often, to care always." I can't think of a better description of any church. That's the kind of love every church should express for every human being.

I heard a story about a young girl who was serving as an acolyte for the first time in her church. In the sacristy she put on her white robe and was briefed by one of the senior acolytes about her role in the worship services. Seeing that she seemed a bit nervous, the priest went up to her and said, "Don't worry about making a mistake." Without a moment's hesitation, the young girl replied, "Oh, I'm not worried, because church is the one place where you can make mistakes and it's still okay."

That young girl had it right. Shouldn't the church be the one place where people find unconditional love and acceptance, where we come as we are, wounds and warts and all? The church should be the one place that people can turn to when they can't turn anywhere else. At its best, the church is a community of wounded people, men and women with troubled minds and burdened consciences, all loved by God. The church is a community of people bound together by their strengths and their brokenness, a community of people who are limping toward the sunrise, but know that God's love claims them, everyone. The church is the place where people can make a lot of mistakes and still feel loved, accepted and forgiven. I like the way Pastor Tim Timmons put it: "I'm not okay, you're not okay, but that's okay."

Let's be clear about this. Church is not an organization that you join. It is a family where you belong, a home where you are loved and a hospital where you find healing. The church should be the one place where you can share your pain with others without being judged, criticized, or condemned. When people are hurting in the church, they should expect the support of their fellow members. When someone is going through a tough time, pastoral caregivers may write a note of encouragement, call on the phone, make a visit to your house, or meet with you for coffee. When you find it difficult to love yourself, you should expect members to love you. When you are in grief or struggle with doubt, you should find a community where you can feel safe and secure; having neither to weigh your

thoughts nor measure your words, but to pour them all out just as they are, knowing there are people who are listening to you, deeply caring about you, and who desire the best for you.

Several years ago, I read of a man who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. When news reached his friends of his condition, they rallied to his support, overwhelming him with letters and notes and words of encouragement. No, Alzheimer's did not abate. There was no "miracle" – if by that you mean a cure. Eventually he died from complications of the disease, but throughout the process he was surrounded by family, friends and church that loved him to his dying breath. In his last message to friends, he quoted William Shakespeare: "Fear not, all will yet be well."

"Fear not, all will yet be well" – those words were taken to heart by actor Charlton Heston who died, as he lived, a Christian, a believer in Jesus, and a member of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Pacific Palisades, California. The truth is: there is no challenge, no burden, and no adversity that we must face alone. The church is here to walk with us, listen to us, pray with us, and support us in whatever life throws our way.

The Rev. Dr. Gary Nicolosi

September 7, 2025

Text – Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Proper 18, C

Advent Episcopal Church, Sun City West, AZ

