For the Good of All

Galatians 6:1-10
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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We've reached the last Sunday in my September "What I Did on My Sabbatical" sermon series. Thank you for indulging me. Next week is Thanksgiving and we'll return to our regularly scheduled programming. ☺

Today, I'm not going to talk about a trip that I took or a conference I attended. Rather, I want to talk about a book that I read and about how it has been affecting my thinking about our cultural moment and about the nature and role of the church.

A word of warning at the outset. It's not a pleasant topic. But I think it's a vitally important one.

The topic today is one of the crises of our time: the skyrocketing levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, addiction, and other mental health challenges that cripple so many people.

There is no shortage of evidence of this, whether it's the opioid crisis dominating the news in our own city (and many others), or the crisis levels of depression and anxiety that seem to be pervasive in Western culture, often among the young, or the rootlessness experienced by many people in an individualistic and consumeristic culture.

I suspect I am not describing a foreign reality. Whether we look at our own neighbourhoods, or our circles of family and friends, or even in our church—many of us see this.

Something isn't working. Many *around* us and many *among* us are not well.

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I read a book over my sabbatical that seemed to me a powerful diagnostic of our cultural moment. The book was by Johann Hari and was called *Lost Connections*.

Hari is looking at the situation I've just described. He's looking at it through analysis of some of the best science out there.

He's also coming at it from a very personal perspective, as someone who has suffered with depression since his teenage years in England.

For most of his twenties, Hari coped by ingesting higher and higher doses of anti-depressants and self-medicating in other harmful ways. He was convinced that his problems were due to something in his brain chemistry and kept trying to find the right drugs or doses or combinations of drugs and doses to make him feel better about life.

After a decade or so of this, Hari started to wonder if there might be more to the story than that the serotonin levels in his brain were off.

His research led him to a surprising conclusion—a conclusion he had not anticipated and a conclusion he didn't really want.

If I were to summarize Hari's thesis, it would be that depression and anxiety and loneliness and addiction are more *social* problems than *chemical* problems.

To put it bluntly, Hari argues that we're not living well. We have *lost connections* (hence the title of the book).

Our communities are fragmented and isolated due to plummeting civic engagement.

Many struggle with meaningless and undervalued work in unstable economies that are designed for efficiency and profit rather than human flourishing.

The grand narratives once provided by religion that gave meaning to life have been discarded or deemed outdated and irrelevant, and replaced by destructive forms of individualism and consumerism.

Marriages and families are falling apart at catastrophic rates due to changing social and ethical norms.

The aforementioned unstable economies drive people ever further away from family and networks of support to find jobs.

One stat that blew me away was that in 2004, the most common answer given by a cross section of American citizens to the question, "How many confidants do you have that you could turn to in a time of crisis?" was "none."

And all of this has, of course, coincided with the rise of the Internet which magnifies all of the above.

Social media very often makes us even lonelier and more depressed than we otherwise might be, with its relentless demands to be constantly performing and parading our best selves online where we naturally compare ourselves with all the other selves out there.

Johann Hari is clear—and I want to be even *more* clear—that he doesn't think that antidepressants and anxiety medication are bad in and of themselves. They can and do help people, sometimes in powerful ways.

But he wonders—and I also wonder—if we too often default to pharmaceutical options as the only potential solution to our problems without asking hard and important questions about how we are living and what we are prioritizing, individually and collectively, and how this affects our mental health.

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Perhaps you could do with a bit of good news right about now?

You didn't come to church to be reminded of all these unpleasant realities! You didn't come to church be told about big cultural trends that are leading us down destructive paths.

What are *you* supposed to do about these massive issues? What are *any* of us supposed to do about them?!

Well, the good news is that you came to church.

The good news is that the church could be a big part of what many people are looking for, whether they realize it or not.

Johan Hari offers a series of important reconnections that he feels will address the mental health crisis of our times.

Hari is not a religious man—he calls himself an atheist, although I don't think he's very good at his atheism—but as I read his recommendations, I couldn't help but think that each and every one of them is anchored in Christian teaching and finds expression in the local church (at least it should!).

I'm going to go through a few of them really quickly.

Reconnection To Other People. Hari tells a few stories about small communities that rallied around a shared vision. The stories are inspiring but they are also rare.

Christian theology declares that we were created *in* love, *to* love and to *be* loved.

And Jesus not only ratified all this but took it to another level entirely in his command to love not only those who love us, but to love our enemies.

Jesus knew that our health, as spiritual beings created for love and community, was bound to our ability to look beyond ourselves and to extend love to even the most unlikely corners of life.

The idea that we are most fully human and healthy when we are learning how to love and be loved by others has deep roots in Christian history and theology.

We learn this at church.

Reconnection to Meaningful Work. Hari tells the story of a bike store collective in Baltimore that was formed by a group of employees that were dissatisfied in their work and who decided to democratize and profit-share and create a super cool store.

But not everyone has the freedom or the resources to go out and create a new employment situation that is fulfilling and inspiring.

Here, I think the Christian tradition contains deep resources and examples of those who have learned to cultivate the discipline of dignifying all labour as an offering to God and to neighbour.

Christians declare that virtually all work can be meaningful, spiritual and even satisfying if it is offered in the right spirit and for the right reasons.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't do everything we can to eliminate labour conditions that are degrading and inhumane or that we shouldn't resist economic and social structures that create these conditions, but Christian theology offers the possibility of transcending even the most difficult work conditions and consecrating work that would be considered meaningless by most people.

We hear this at church.

Reconnection to Meaningful Values. Hari is rightly critical of materialism and advertising and the "junk values" they condition us to embrace. His recommendation is to reconnect to the things that matter to us.

But what if the things that matter to us aren't healthy or worth pursuing? There are certainly people whose values don't seem to extend much beyond the pursuit of pleasure and self-interest.

We need more than to just each peer inside of our own selves and figure out what we personally find valuable and go with that. We need values that transcend whatever happens to matter to us—values that call us to our best selves, to what it means to be human.

Values like love of God and neighbour. Values like worship and gratitude and self-sacrifice. Values like forgiveness and mercy to heal the wounds that inevitably inflict upon one another.

We need something beyond ourselves to lift our gaze. So we come to church.

Reconnection to Sympathetic Joy and Overcoming Addiction to the Self. Hari tells a few stories which tell us to move beyond ourselves and be happy for others' success.

He says that meditation and, bizarrely, LSD might help us with this (I'm not joking).

Or, we might look to historic Christian teaching which has always taught that self-denial is the path to true freedom, and that the cultivation of the love Christ taught and modeled is the highest human end that a human being we could and ought to aspire to.

We are reminded that we are not the center of the universe at church.

Reconnection to Acknowledging and Overcoming Trauma. Hari encourages us to be honest about our experiences, to tell our story and move beyond shame as a way to counteract the depression that these experiences can cause. Hari even offers praise for various forms of the practice of confession—sharing our pain with other people, listening compassionately, and finding a way forward together.

Again, these are all great recommendations, but they are not new discoveries, as Hari often presents them.

These are things that our culture has *forgotten*, things we have left behind, things that the Christian tradition has long taught and, at its best, modelled.

We receive the call to be a community of listening, compassion, sharing, and confession at church.

Reconnection to the Future. Hari talks about how our economic structures have robbed people of a sense of a meaningful future and how this fuels depression and anxiety.

He recommends a Universal Basic Income (UBI) as one of the ways forward here. He may be right.

But I think restoring a sense of a hopeful future goes far beyond reconfiguring economic structures, important as this task may be.

One of the main results of the secular turn that has taken place in the West over the past half-century or more is the almost complete elimination of any kind of meaningful future horizon.

Even many Christians I talk to have no sturdy hope that this world is but a foretaste of the world that is to come.

And yet, from a Christian perspective, to be human is to be dependent upon the One who made us and the One who has promised goodness in our future.

This is not applying the balm of an imaginary heaven to heal the wounds of the present.

This is to ask deep and vital questions about who we are as human beings, why we value what we do, and why we seem so utterly unable to live without hope.

We come to church for hope—in this world and in the next.

So, in sum, I'm grateful for Johann Hari's work in pushing us beyond an approach to our mental health crisis that is simplistic and far less than we need as human beings.

I think he is right. We have *lost connection*, and this is the deepest source of the unhappiness that is so pervasive in our times.

I just think he's left an important connection out—connection with God and with the way of being human *with* and *for* each other that we were created for.

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I should probably say something about our Scripture reading this morning. ☺

Galatians 6:1-10 can seem like a bit of a rambling passage. In ten verses, Paul manages to touch on correcting and restoring people who have sinned, avoiding temptation, not thinking too highly of ourselves, testing our own actions, compensating those who provide instruction, and reaping what we sow.

It's almost like he has a whole bunch of things to say his problem child (and the church in Galatia kind of *was* his problem child) and he can't decide what he wants to say first.

But two sentences leapt out at me from this passage

1. Bear (help carry) one another's burdens.
2. Let us not growing weary in doing good.

The church is the place where we help one another carry the burdens of life.

We don't do this because it's a pragmatic way to address social problems. The church of Jesus Christ is far bigger than a mental health strategy.

But it's amazing how if we put first things first, a lot of the rest begins to fall into place.

We help carry one another's burdens because in so doing, Paul says, we fulfill the law of Christ. Which is what, exactly?

John 13:34-35

> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

I want to be clear, one more time: I am *not* suggesting that Christians and those who are part of healthy communities will never have mental health issues or struggle with depression or feel anxious or need medication or that if you do experience any of these things it means that you're somehow failing at love and life. Not at all.

But I do think that if local Christian communities are seeking to live and love well together—bearing one another's burdens, helping members stand up and take responsibility for themselves when necessary, not growing weary of doing good, loving one another as Christ has taught us to love, this will be a net benefit to the overall health of our people, whether this is mental, physical, relational, or spiritual.

And it will be a powerful witness in a world that is *desperately* seeking this kind of community, whether it realizes it or not.

So, in closing, I want to ask some very practical questions.

How are we, as a church, doing in helping one another bear the burdens of life?

Are there those among us who are lonely that could use a visit?

Are there those among us who are struggling with depression that could use a listening ear?

Are there those among us who need to be encouraged and equipped to better carry their own load?

Are there those among us who are struggling with addictions who could use support?

Are there those among us going through a crisis of meaning and hope?

Are we honest enough with one another to allow others into our pain? To allow ourselves to occasionally be carried?

These are hard questions to ask and to answer. They force us to be honest with ourselves and with our community. But in my experience, you'd be surprised how simple it can be to help bear a burden.

Very often, it simply involves a listening ear. Or a shared cup of coffee. Or playing a game.

Or being honest and saying, "I can't fix this burden, but I can try to help you carry it."

It's incredible how much good can be done by simple expressions that acknowledge that we are present with people in their pain, that we care, that we believe that burdens are for sharing.

And that word "sharing" is a crucial one.

This is a task for the *whole church*. It's not just for pastors and deacons and those who are "good at that sort of thing." If we "outsource" the task of burden-bearing to a chosen few, it will lead to burnout and resentment.

We can't all help carry burdens in the same way, but we can all do something.

Johann Hari's book makes it plain that stronger community connections is the most vital thing that many people are missing and that this is having catastrophic effects upon people's mental health and well-being.

It's not the *only* factor, but it's a desperately necessary one, and it's one that Western culture has been steadily eroding for years.

I am convinced that real, sacrificial, patient, loving Christian community is a gift that the church can offer to a world in pain.

It's not always easy. It requires commitment, investment, and time. But it can be a powerful antidote to the dis-ease that we see all around us.

So, let us not grow weary in doing good. Let us work for the good of all.

Let us bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Amen.