

Article

Guidance from Unexpected Places after COVID-19: Learning from Jesus and the Early Christian Communities in Responding to Trauma

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic proved challenging and traumatic for many, with its effects still being felt four years later. This article contends that the witness of Jesus of Nazareth and the early Christian communities can serve as guides for navigating post-pandemic life. This article will do so by examining the historical context of first-century Jewish Palestine with attention given to the Roman Empire's brutality and traumatizing impact. It will then provide an analysis of the Matthean Jesus' call to love one's enemies and the Markan Jesus' emphasis on bearing the cross as constructive responses to the trauma Matthew and Mark's communities went through. Lastly, it will show how Jesus and the early Christian communities reveal that pain and trauma can be healthily transcended for better ways and behaviors. Thus, what has happened to us, however painful, can bear the seeds of a healthy purpose and meaning that can lead to us and our world becoming more humanized. The research methodology in this article is interdisciplinary, employing biblical theological, historical, and psychological methodologies.

Keywords: Jesus; early Christian communities; trauma; COVID-19



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1. Introduction

It is hard to imagine that over four years ago, in March 2020, the entire world came to a standstill due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and restrictions went into full effect in order to slow the spread of the virus, leaving many, if not most, anxiously wondering what lay ahead. And for good reason; up until this moment, most of us on the North American continent had lived lives of predictability and convenience due to our technological advancement and affluence. For the first time in our lives, the regular routine of getting up and going to our jobs, dropping our children off at school, and simply going to a local store or a restaurant without much thought was not an option. The prospect of a dangerous virus invaded our lives and our minds, leaving us feeling anxious, frustrated, and uncertain. Without much warning or even our input, we were forced into a liminal space.

Unfortunately, for many of us, being in the liminal space of the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be challenging and traumatic. A once mostly predictable and safe world was no longer so, and the wounds and scars will likely remain with us for the foreseeable future. As one family member recently remarked casually to me in a conversation, "COVID was really awful, I still don't think I have fully recovered". His words simply reflected what some research had already shown, which was that not only did the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions pose a threat to physical health, but it also posed a threat to mental health. The latter may be with us far longer, with one in five people developing depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result (Kaubisch et al. 2022).

Such should not surprise us when we consider that psychological trauma "is a person's experience of emotional distress resulting from an event that overwhelms the capacity to emotionally digest it" (Psychology Today Staff n.d.). For many, the pandemic brought

with it the loss of predictability, emotional and economic security, a sense of autonomy and control over one's life, physical and social connection with others, and so much more. That is a lot to emotionally digest at once. Such seems to vindicate Bessel Van Der Kolk, who wrote, "One does not have to be a combat soldier or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, our neighbors" (Van Der Kolk 2014, p. 1).

Nonetheless, though the COVID-19 pandemic is behind us, its effects are not, and they will be with us for some time. In fact, a recent survey from the American Psychological Association revealed that Americans experienced collective trauma from COVID-19. The survey showed that many are still struggling with the significant changes wrought on by the pandemic as revealed by increases in mental illness and stress in daily life (Van Beusekom 2023). Of course, when dealing with these effects, we can choose to engage, or we can choose to deny. One might even say we can fight or we can flee from their ever-invasive effects. However, like so many challenging circumstances before us, we can also work towards finding meaning and purpose in our trauma and our experiences so that we might more healthily engage with our world both now and in the future. Yet it is my contention that we are in need of guidance in doing so, and one such person and community that can do so is Jesus of Nazareth and the early Christian communities that he and his first followers founded in first-century Jewish Palestine who went on to write Gospels like Mark and Matthew.

2. Methodological Considerations

At the outset, some readers may be surprised by my contention that Jesus of Nazareth and the early Christian communities might provide us with guidance for dealing with the traumatic effects of the pandemic, and understandably so. Because of this, a few qualifiers are needed regarding my methodological approach:

It is common to place biblical texts and theology in conversation with history as the development of the former is often borne out of specific human experiences and circumstances related to the historical context of that specific time and place. At the same time, the field of psychology is still fairly new when compared to the fields of biblical theology and history, primarily coming to the fore in the twentieth century. Thus, I recognize that by applying findings from the field of psychology, particularly related to trauma and epigenetics, I risk being anachronistic. However, doing so is not without precedent, particularly as it relates to the field of biblical studies. In fact, during the 2013 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, several scholars came together under the theme "Biblical Literature and the Hermeneutics of Trauma" with one area of focus being "the further exploration of the communal nature of traumatic expressions" (Garber 2015, p. 38). One of the presenters at that conference, Elizabeth Boase, who explored the role of communal trauma as an interpretive framework for the book of Lamentations (Garber 2015, p. 38), insightfully wrote some years earlier concerning the said book that "Suffering is an age old problem. The experience of suffering brings disjunction a discordance, and in the existential crisis which follows severe suffering, human beings—both individually and communally—struggle to construct meaning" (Boase 2008, p. 449).

Nonetheless, as David Graber highlights, there is certainly difficulty in negotiating trauma theory and the scriptures, which are very much the product of an ancient worldview. After all, "trauma" is the product of modern psychological theory (Garber 2015, p. 34). Thus, we must be careful. Yet, there are certain commonalities to the human experience throughout all times and places as history bears witness. Here, the insights of biblical scholar Sarah Emanuel prove helpful. In her work on the book of Revelation, after reviewing trauma theory and its application to understanding the scriptures, she explains,

"I suggest that biblical texts know the relational psychosocial effects associated with trauma. Although not written in the wake of capitalist-based colonial enterprises, they still respond to similar imperial-based systems of oppression. And although written long before the DSM, they still bear witness to the traumatic

wounds of repeated colonial subjugation, and also oppose the very conditions of imperialism through storytelling” (Emanuel 2020, p. 73).

Similarly, Johannine scholar Shelly Rambo, who has used trauma theory as a hermeneutical lens to read the Gospel of John, explains that various theologians’ engagement with trauma studies “testifies to the fact that trauma is not simply a category that can be confined to the fields of psychology and counseling; it has broadened to present profound challenges to epistemology, constructions of the self, and theological understandings of time” (Rambo 2015, p. 11). Thus, by applying insights from the field of psychology, we are also enabled to humanize those guides from the past who all too often become so idealized that they are no longer relatable and dare I say, human. Trauma is common throughout human history, and it can get passed on to future generations. In fact, its “imprint is more endemic than we realize” (Maté and Maté 2022, p. 19). Yet, it can also be healed, but we are in need of guidance in doing so.

Secondly, most of the material that we have about Jesus of Nazareth comes from the four Gospels whose historicity has been debated endlessly. Better still, readers may recall the Jesus Seminar and their modernist quest for the Historical Jesus, which left much to be desired leaving us with less certainty about who Jesus was rather than more. With that said, within this study, Jesus should be understood as both a historical and archetypal figure. That is, the result of both a historical person and the early Christian communities struggle to be faithful to that person in their given context, particularly the communities of Matthew and Mark. Therefore, when I write about the historical world of the Jesus of Nazareth, I am also seeking to provide a generalized view of the world of first-century Jewish Palestine where the Christian movement began. For example, although the Christian audiences/communities of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew were likely a generation or two removed from the historical Jesus, the historical dynamics that they faced would have been similar to those that faced Jesus (Myers [1988] 2008, p. 42).

3. Historical Considerations and Trauma’s Stamp

The Roman Empire’s ascendancy was well underway around the time of Jesus’ birth, which some consider to have taken place around 4 B.C.E. Geopolitically speaking, Jewish Palestine was of considerable import to the Empire, as it was on its eastern edges. Such concern was due to the Parthian Empire, which was to the east. In essence, Jewish Palestine was a buffer zone, and Rome wanted to maintain a firm grip on the area in light of the Parthian’s potential threat. Moreover, given the Jewish people’s history and the Maccabean revolt, it was known for being a challenging area to rule. Thus, Rome spared no expense in maintaining control and dominance in that area of the Empire. Nonetheless, most Jewish Palestinians did not look upon Roman imperial rule favorably due to many factors, from harsh military rule to oppressive taxation.

Rome’s dominance over the area would be made quite clear in 4 B.C.E. After Herod the Great’s death, his son Antipas went to Rome to have his father’s will ratified by Caesar Augustus and the Senate. While gone, a widespread rebellion broke out in Galilee and Judea led by a rebel named Judas. In retaliation, the Roman general Varus burned down and destroyed towns throughout the countryside and crucified about two thousand men believed to be rebels. Going further, Varus would burn down the city of Sepphoris and the surrounding area, enslaving thousands of its inhabitants. Bear in mind that Nazareth was four miles north. Such a response was not simply physical warfare but also psychological warfare. Rome knew that such brutality would serve to intimidate “the surviving populace into acquiescence in the reestablished Roman imperial order” (Horsley 2003, p. 28). When Herod Antipas finally returned in 3 B.C.E., he found Sepphoris mostly destroyed and decided to make it his capital city. As a result, he embarked on a large building project that lasted for decades and employed many laborers and artisans from the surrounding villages like Nazareth. We know from the gospel accounts that Jesus’ father, Joseph, was a carpenter or laborer (*teknon*). Based on the evidence, he likely worked in Sepphoris, given the proximity of Nazareth to the city (Case 1926).

We can only imagine the traumatic impact Rome's actions may have had on people who saw relatives, friends, and fellow villagers suffering under such brutality. It is likely that Jesus and the later Christian communities grew up in such trauma residue, hearing the pain and mourning of relatives and villagers. Such would not have been quickly forgotten, especially considering that Roman military forces repeatedly enslaved the people and destroyed the villages around Nazareth throughout the first century.

That such events would have had a traumatic impact on Jesus of Nazareth and later generations of Galileans is highly likely. We must bear in mind that trauma can not only be individual but also communal and cultural. The impact of trauma can last for many generations, facilitating or suppressing how genes are expressed in later generations (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018). For some time now, research in the field of epigenetics has been uncovering the impact trauma has on one's genes. Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda write, "Epigenetics has been described as the means through which environmental influences 'get under the skin,' directing transcriptional activity and influencing the expression or suppression of genes" (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018, p. 1764).

Interestingly enough, we can see evidence of the fight or flight response in the history of first-century Palestine. First-century Jewish Palestine was a politically charged environment with would-be Messiahs/revolutionaries employing violence to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression and religious corruption. It was noted above that it was Judas, a Galilean and messianic-like figure, who led the failed revolt that ended in utter destruction and trauma. It should also be noted that the Jewish Revolt about six decades later was led by messianic figures as well, such as Menahem (Sicarii leader), Eleazar ben Simon, Simon bar Giora, and others (Myers [1988] 2008, pp. 66–67). However, the city of Sepphoris wanted no part of the Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE). Instead, they sided with the Romans and asked for their support against the threat of the rebellious Galileans. Jerusalem would be destroyed, and Sepphoris would remain unscathed. Such an outcome would have validated their initial position that taking on the Roman Empire militarily was foolish. Their lack of resistance also validated the effectiveness of the Roman scorched earth campaign, whose goal was to strike terror and thereby submissiveness in the local population (Horsley 2003, pp. 27–31). Such historical awareness to not challenge Rome would have been enormously impressed upon Jesus and those who made up the early Christian communities.

4. Responding Constructively

In the conclusion of their article on cultural trauma and epigenetics, Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda helpfully note that while parental and cultural trauma affects development, it is still challenging to narrow down the specifics of that impact. At the same time, while much attention is given to the negative impacts of trauma, they also note that "the narrative we tell about its meaning has much power in determining its consequences" (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018, p. 1773). In other words, the traumatized can create meaning that can be destructive or constructive. And it is here that I believe that we can further look to Jesus and the early Christian communities for guidance. Having established that they likely came out of a community and culture that was consistently traumatized by the Roman Empire throughout the first century, we can better understand their constructive response and thereby draw guidance.

I noted above that within this study, Jesus should be understood as both a historical and archetypal figure. I do so because most of what we know about Jesus of Nazareth comes from the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each Gospel was originally written for a specific Christian community, with the words and actions of Jesus being used and applied to the needs and challenges of those specific communities. For example, it is generally understood that Matthew's Gospel was likely written to a predominantly Jewish-Christian community living in Antioch of Syria toward the latter part of first-century C.E. Matthew's audience would have been well acquainted with Rome's brutality having been severely punished for protesting against Gaius Caligula's attempts to put a statue of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem in 40 C.E. For doing so, they were attacked, killed, and even

had some of their synagogues burnt down. Later, like many of their fellow Jews in the area of Syrio–Palestine, the relationship with the Roman Empire deteriorated even more with the Jewish Revolt of 66–70 (Carter 2000, p. 30). Nonetheless, by understanding the trauma footprint of the Roman Empire on the area of the historical Jesus and the early Christian communities of Jewish Palestine and its surrounding area, we can now understand more deeply some of Jesus’ most familiar teachings.

One such familiar teaching is Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies found in chapter five of Matthew’s Gospel. Here, in verses 43–48 (NRSV), the Matthean Jesus says,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”.

Given our general familiarity with this text, along with the fact that we are two millennia removed from when Jesus first spoke these words, we do not entirely understand just how radical these words would have been to his original audience. Writing concerning the confusion surrounding the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, Walter Wink explains, “Jesus’ listeners are not those who strike, initiate lawsuits, or impose forced labor, but their victims. . . There are among his hearers people who were subjected to these very indignities, forced to stifle outrage at their dehumanizing treatment by the hierarchical system of class, race, gender, age, and status, and as a result of imperial occupation” (Wink 1992, p. 176). The audience that Jesus originally spoke these words to, as well as the Matthean audience, had every reason and every justification for revenge and hatred toward their enemies. However, fascinatingly enough, Jesus teaches love.

It is important for us to bear in mind that this command to love one’s enemies should not be conflated with being nice or some sort of sentimentality toward another human being that borders on condescension or patronization. Rather, if we take some time to examine the words of these verses, we will come away with a more holistic understanding of love, which I would contend can be borne out of one’s struggle with evil, both personal and collective.

The basis for Jesus’ words to love one’s enemies is because, first and foremost, God does. Jesus is clear about noting that God provides both sun and rain on the unrighteous and the unjust, not just the righteous and the just. God does not hate his enemies but loves them because God’s love is whole and not divided. Thus, this is why Jesus ends this section with verse 48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”. Yet, “perfect” needs to be qualified. Here, Walter Wink proves helpful in explaining:

“It may come as immediate relief to learn that *Jesus could not have said “Be perfect”*. There was no such word, or even concept, in Aramaic or Hebrew. . . The word used by Matthew, *teleios*, was, however, a Greek aesthetic term. It described the perfect geometric form, or the perfect sculpture. It was seldom used in ethical discourse, since moral perfection is not within the grasp of human beings, and would have even been regarded, in Greek piety, as a form of hybris. Matthew appears to have taken *teleios* over from the Greek translation of Deut 18:13, where the term was used to render the Hebrew word *tamim* (“whole, complete, finished, entire, to have integrity”) (Wink 1992, p. 268”).

Therefore, verse 48 should be translated, “be *whole, complete, mature* as your heavenly father is *whole, complete, mature*”. The love that the Matthean Jesus calls his audience to is one that is full and all-encompassing like God’s love. In other words, rather than getting enmeshed in who is worthy of love, we are simply to be loving and compassionate just as God is so with us and all people according to Jesus.

Given the history that we have explored above, it is simply amazing to consider that both Jesus and the early Christian communities would teach and seek to embody such a praxis. While they certainly had experienced suffering, pain, and trauma on many fronts for a myriad of reasons, they sought to transcend these things. Life in Galilee and Antioch was certainly not easy by any means, especially when compared with standards today, which makes such an emphasis astonishing. Ultimately, the Matthean Jesus' teaching on love was deeply profound when we consider who he and his community were and who their enemies were. It should stand as a lesson to us that the potential for a better world is always before us, both in the present and in the future, despite the circumstances. Such does not mean that these communities did not struggle to love their enemies, but such a praxis, even ideal, was a part of their communal narrative that truly countered the prevailing narratives of both Rome and Jerusalem. These communities did not continue the cycles of violence resulting in more trauma on themselves and others but may very well have allowed their trauma to significantly rework their entire map of faith (Rambo 2015, p. 15).

Much more focused on the actions and praxis of Jesus, we witness the embodiment of this teaching to love one's enemies in Mark's Gospel, too. Considered by many to be the first Gospel written, I find myself in resonance with scholars such as Ched Myers ([1988] 2008) and Joel Marcus (1992), who contend that Mark was likely written sometime during the Jewish Revolt (66–70) for an audience in either northern Palestine or Syria. Like the Matthean audience, the Markan audience would have been familiar with communal trauma, especially during a time such as the Jewish Revolt.

However, with the Markan Jesus, we also witness an emphasis on transcending the fight response to Roman oppression and religious corruption with non-violent action and love. The hinge-point or center-point of Mark's Gospel comes not with a triumphal call to Messianic greatness and glory but instead with Jesus' revelation that he will be rejected, suffer, die, and rise again. Added to this is the call for his disciples to take up a Roman cross and follow him (Mark 8:27–9:1). Herein, we witness Jesus taking a Roman instrument of execution used to terrorize and traumatize local populations such as the Galileans and offering it up as a pathway and result of a life of following him and his teachings. And fascinatingly enough, these early communities understood this call well. That they stayed and sought to follow the teachings and way of this Jesus is all the more remarkable when one considers Martin Hengel's words, "The excessive use made of crucifixion by the Romans in the pacification of Judea meant that from the beginning of direct Roman rule crucifixion was taboo as a form of the Jewish death penalty. This can also be inferred from the rabbinic interpretation of Deuteronomy 21:23" (Hengel 1977, p. 85). Readers should note that Deuteronomy 21:23 states, "for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse". Is it not amazing that an instrument of such torture, brutality, and trauma was turned into a symbol of God's love for humanity? Yet, we witness just that in Mark's Gospel.

Interestingly enough, in Mark's Gospel, we read of warnings against going after rebel Jewish leaders who claim to be the Messiah leading in the military fight against the Romans during the Jewish Revolt (Mark 13:5–8). We also encounter a realism about where Markan discipleship will lead—betrayal, rejection, persecution, even at the hands of one's family for not remaining faithful to the Way of the Cross and non-violent love (Mark 13:9–13). However, amid these challenging and terrible circumstances, the Markan Jesus emphasizes "staying awake" and not succumbing to the old order of "might makes right". For if healing is to begin, if evil is to begin to be transcended, disciples must understand that the Way of Jesus is committed to nothing less than the complete unraveling of the present order, resisting it with the practice of a new one that is "wholly other" (Myers [1988] 2008, p. 339). Here, we witness Mark transmit the cultural memory of the early Christians through story and praxis. With his Gospel, Mark also provides a source of learning and meaning-making for future generations to make of their world and respond constructively (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018, p. 1772).

5. Transcending the Pain

What the witness of Jesus and the early Christian communities teach us is that pain and trauma can be healthily transcended for better ways and behaviors. In other words, what has happened to us, however painful, can bear the seeds of a healthy purpose and meaning that can lead to us and our world becoming more humanized. I contend that looking to persons and communities like Jesus and the early Christians can provide us with not only guidance but inspiration for the world before us. Despite their communal trauma, they found meaning and purpose in seeking to transcend the very behaviors that caused such pain through love and practicing a new order of being in the Way of Jesus.

Interestingly enough, in their study on trauma and epigenetics, Lehrner and Yehuda note that the field of psychology has begun to include not only post-traumatic maladjustment but also post-traumatic growth in the study of trauma. Post-traumatic growth is defined as psychological change that follows a traumatic experience, which results in an appreciation of life, more meaningful relationships, a more robust spiritual life, as well as a greater sense of personal strength. They go on to state, “One hypothesized mechanism for this growth is the development of a trauma narrative that acknowledges the reality of the trauma, allows that individual to let go of beliefs or schema that are inconsistent with this reality, and generates new worldviews that allow for continued movement toward values and goals” (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018, p. 1772). It would appear that this is what Jesus and the early Christian communities had done with their trauma. The Gospels acknowledge the trauma of Jesus’ crucifixion and, like Mark, make the Cross central to its story. In turn, they generate a new worldview for those who seek to embody the praxis found therein.

Going further, Lehrner and Yehuda highlight that some suggest that such traumatic events can serve as “turning points,” forming “the basis of shared social narratives that can transform the community’s sense of identity, principles, and values, and understanding of the world” (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018). Such an understanding may enable us to re-evaluate the trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Seeing it as a turning point, we might be better able to identify new and constructive meanings that would instill growth and hope.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts need not define us for the negative. Rather, it might be important for us to continue to reflect on what we learned about ourselves and the world around us. That is, those things that we may not have realized about ourselves before the pandemic but that the said dynamics therein brought to the fore. If I might use myself as an example, I realized that my deep-seated need for control, predictability, and convenience was far greater than I had realized. The pandemic forced me to reckon with these shadow aspects of my personality that were easily hidden away due to a life where I rarely, if ever, wanted for anything. My intention is not to make light of the deep-seated challenges many of us encountered during that time and currently still struggle with. However, I do think there are elements of gold hidden in that dark time that, if we sit with them, can prompt us to become more complete human beings, also creating more empathy and understanding for those around us. When we do so, we realize that we have far more in common with others than we may have thought. Interestingly, Brother David Steindl-Rast connects such themes back to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:

“You find him [Jesus], for instance, saying, ‘Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’. Yet he makes it clear that this is not the perfection of suppressing the darkness, but the integration. That’s the way that Matthew puts it in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus talk of our Father in heaven who lets the sun shine on the good and the bad, and lets the rain fall on the just and unjust alike. Its both the rain and the sun, not only the sun. And it’s both the just and the unjust (Steindl-Rast 1991, p. 132)”.

Nonetheless, our attempts at finding meaning in the darker parts that we encountered during the pandemic may lead us to some unknown and unexpected places. Certainly, that is what we witness with the disciples of Mark’s Gospel. These were men seemingly obsessed with worldly glory (Mark 9:33–37), with what they would get out of following

Jesus (Mark 10:35–45), only to have their worlds turned completely upside-down when Jesus was crucified, but also when Jesus' tomb was found empty on Easter morning. The disciples hit "rock bottom" as a result of these events, but then they were able to reconstruct and reimagine a different way of being in the world. They "shed their illusions" (Maté and Maté 2022, p. 483) of greatness, which had only blinded them toward the wholeness that Jesus offered them. "Disillusioned" from such things, they went out and shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ, creating and fostering communities around this very Gospel, rejoicing when they were persecuted, and in some cases losing their lives. It also was likely disorienting when Jesus first told the people to love their enemies, but was he and the early Christian communities able to do so because they had learned from the pain and the trauma of the people around him? Rather than meet pain with pain through hate and revenge, they transcended the pain. Rather than being reactive, they proved to be creative. Here, we ought to consider what they were able to do in light of Gabor Maté's words below:

"The problems facing the world are challenging enough without adding our own stresses stemming from our habitual coping patterns. Are we seeing things *creatively* or *reactively*? Automatic reactions are, after all, the specialty of the traumatized personality, which is the ultimate hammer that only sees nails. Creativity, meanwhile, is about something more fundamental: it starts with seeing that we can create, and then has a feel for what wants to be created. It is a facet of authenticity, a close cousin of authorship" (Maté and Maté 2022, p. 482).

6. Conclusions

As the COVID-19 pandemic is left further behind us with each passing day and as our lives continue on, it might be best to recall the words of Bessel Van Der Kolk that, "Nobody can 'treat' war, or abuse, rape, molestation, or any horrendous event, for that matter; what has happened cannot be undone. But what *can* be dealt with are the imprints of the trauma on body, mind, and soul. . ." (Van Der Kolk 2014, p. 205). The witness of Jesus and the early Christian communities can certainly guide us in this process. As explored above, they certainly encountered traumatic experiences and were steeped in the residue of trauma. However, they did not allow their trauma to become a reactive force that only made things worse for themselves and those around them. Rather, they were able to generate new stories and new worldviews that resulted in a more holistic way of being human in the world. In fact, one way in which they did so was by writing the four Gospels, which humanity still benefits from today. However, like Jesus and the early Christian communities, the burden and responsibility of making meaning and healthily moving forward falls on us as we seek ways to deal with our collective trauma (Van Beusekom 2023).

While our trauma may get "under the skin", that does not mean that it has to prevent us from living in creative and constructive ways. We can decide what our trauma means, and how it might teach us for the better. Amid our collective trauma (American Psychological Association 2023), it is very easy to succumb to a sense of victimhood in which we convince ourselves that there is nothing that we can do. However, as Gabriel Maté reminds us, trauma is what takes place *inside* of us as a result of what happened to us. It is not the event itself. Therefore, this means that because it is inside of us and not outside of us, we certainly have a say in how we respond. Such means that healing and reconnection are possibilities (Maté and Maté 2022, p. 35). There is power in stepping into the vulnerability of our collective trauma. We can draw from our pain, make meaning, and provide healing to ourselves and the world around us. We can become, in the words of Henri Nouwen, "wounded healers".

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