

During the 2022 Schaff Lectures at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Dr. John Swinton presented “Love in the Time of COVID: What the Pandemic has Taught Us About *Not* Loving Our Neighbors.”

Swinton, professor in practical theology and pastoral care and chair in divinity and religious studies at the University of Aberdeen, argues for a post-COVID imagination that helps us to see wickedness and utilize Christian practices as a way of countering such sins and enabling our neighbors and ourselves truly to experience the kind of love that God requires.



Watch the lecture on the Seminary’s YouTube page: <https://youtu.be/EvZWofNKpIU>.

Session 1: Building a New Normal

Watch the lecture from 7:00 to 28:58.

1. Swinton discusses the biblical understanding of systemic sin and evil found in Romans ch. 1-7, describing sin as a power embedded within our systems and largely unseen. It’s hard to resist something we can’t see or don’t know is there, he says.
 - a. What examples of systemic sin and evil exist today? Think not only on global and national levels, but also on the local community level.
 - b. How can we better *recognize* and help others see systemic sin and evil, and not only that, but also *resist* it?
2. What is the problem with the “new normal”, according to Swinton? What ought we to be envisioning and expecting instead?
3. The impulse to hoard in response to the pandemic, Swinton says, comes from feelings of anxiety, fear, and scarcity.
 - a. Of what selfish hoarding do you/we need to repent?
 - b. Walter Brueggemann contrasts the scarcity mentality of the modern Western world and of Pharaoh in Exodus to the God of abundance. How would you describe your current way of living – in anxiety and scarcity or trust and abundance? Why?
4. “Love takes time...it has its own speed” (Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*). How do you understand the command to practice Sabbath? How well do you practice it? Name one place in your life in which God is calling you to slow down to a more comfortable pace.

Closing prayer

Lord, we confess our inability to recognize and resist the evil which is embedded in the systems all around us. Help us to be more aware of the ways we've structured things to benefit some at the expense of others, especially when we are among those who benefit most. Take away the anxiety and fear that lead us to act selfishly, and slow us down enough that we may be reminded to trust in you and your abundance. Amen.

Session 2: Presence and Absence

Watch the lecture from 28:59 to 48:01.

1. "Fast people ignore slow people," says Swinton. What does he mean by this? Picking up on last week's conversation about love having its own speed, how does the pace in which we live communicate who and what we love?
2. Swinton notes that technological distraction and the recent idea of social distancing has eroded trust in our neighbors. Identify the ways he believes this is happening, and examples you see in your own life or community.
3. Explore the concept of the "Behavioral Immune System" described by psychologist Mark Schaller. The physiological responses we have at foul smells, seeing a blemish or pox, or even our definition of beauty can affect our perception of one's health, and thus the level to which we perceive another as a threat or danger to us. Swinton says racism and xenophobia plays into this too, and that COVID anxiety may be heightening manifestations of bias. Do you agree? Why or why not? What is challenging to you about these concepts? What resonates with you?

Closing prayer

You have created us, O God, to feel a diversity of emotions and respond differently to what we see and experience in our neighbor. These emotions and responses are blessings, yet all too often they lead us into mistrust of our neighbors, who are also fearfully and wonderfully made. Forgive us for the distance we keep, for the judgments we make, and for allowing our own fears and anxieties lead to bias and hatred of our beloved neighbors. Enable us to see your beauty in the face of all whom we meet. Amen.

Session 3: So, What Do We Do?

Watch the lecture from 48:02 to 1:10:35.

1. Swinton proposes a post-COVID imagination, by which think and see differently (as in Romans 12:2) and we move from anxiety to trust (Phil. 4:6). Reread these scripture passages and consider them in light of this post-COVID imagination. What creates transformation and trust within us? How do we re-imagine and live into shalom as Swinton describes: a peace that encompasses all relationships and taking God's priorities as our own?
2. Biologist David Haig says we are hard-wired for spiritual experiences and have an innate relational consciousness. Yet we often educate children as if hard science and facts are the real knowledge while ethics, art, and spirituality are hobbies to do (or not do) on one's own time. In so doing, Swinton says, we de-spiritualize our children. Do you sense that de-spiritualization in your own education? What (if anything) can we do to reverse or counteract this tendency?
3. Discuss the "gentle rhythm of guesting and hosting" that Swinton talks about and Jesus exemplifies. It reverses our expectations and our viewpoint, allowing us to relate better with and include the marginalized among our communities. Consider your own congregation or faith community. Is there a Christ-like rhythm of guesting and hosting? If not, what must change for that to happen?

Closing prayer:

Creator God, you have formed and shaped us as spiritual and relational beings. You have commanded us to take on your priorities as our own. Instead, we've marginalized our neighbors, minimized spiritual truths, and clung even more firmly to fear and anxiety. We call upon your Spirit today to reshape and transform us, reverse our expectations, and help us to notice things differently. Draw us into a new rhythm of Christ-like guesting and hosting, so that we may better love all our neighbors. Amen.