

Rogue Saints
*Spirituality for
Good-Hearted Heathens*

Jerry Herships

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Introduction: Happy Hour

Don't worry. I'm just as stunned as you are that you are reading my second book.

Last Call was the story of how I picked up the pieces of my dashed dreams and created a new normal (as a *pastor*, if you can believe that). But even though I'm theoretically part of the religious establishment now, I still have a lot to say about the church and how it connects us to God—and how for many of us, it doesn't.

This book isn't for everyone. But it is for a lot of us, whether we want to admit it or not.

To begin with, let's talk about the fact that I said *in the subtitle* that this book is for heathens. (We won't talk about the fact that after seeing that, *you* picked it up and began reading.)

Merriam-Webster defines *heathen* like this: (1) “of or relating to people or nations that do not acknowledge the God of the Bible,” and (2) “strange, uncivilized.”

So am I calling you a heathen? Of course not—but yeah, kind of. Technically speaking, there are *a lot* of customs and rituals that twenty-first-century Christians

don't do or even believe in. And thank God for that! Some of the customs of the religion that is in our Bible are at best outdated and at worse barbaric. Most Christians of the twenty-first century would be considered heathens by refined people in pretty much any other era. On top of that, we have that troublesome phrase, "the God of the Bible." Now which God would that be? There are as many definitions of God as there are people on the planet. Truth be told, they are probably (at least in part) wrong. St. Augustine said, "If you can conceive it, it's not God." There are *a lot* of interpretations of God in the Bible I don't acknowledge, and that probably goes for you too.

The second definition of heathen is "strange" and "uncivilized." OK, guilty as charged. I am calling you that. But that's a good thing (at least the strange part). I think we need now, more than ever, people who are willing to not fit in, people who are not down with the "one size fits all" of church. Or of anything! You picked up this book probably because the current way you are connecting to God (or not connecting) just feels . . . off. It's not an easy fit, it's off-kilter, it's a bit of a square-peg-in-a-round-hole situation. It's not necessarily *bad*. Just off.

This book is for people who are cynical about, fed up with, or simply uninspired by church as usual. They're good people who manage to live pretty moral lives. (Granted, "pretty moral" is relative.) I would even go so far as to call them, at times, saints. Nelson Mandela said, "I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner that keeps on trying."¹ The readers of this book are people who want to, somehow, keep on trying. They don't need weekly tips from a preacher. They can spot a sermon that has an opening, three points, and a close—with a few *Chicken Soup for the Soul* illustrations thrown in.

They know the tricks preachers sometimes use of throwing in a “In the original Greek . . .” or a “I was reading in the *New Yorker* the other day.” (Make no mistake—I have done both these things. They aren’t bad. But the listener craves something else.) Does this sound like you? Maybe you continue to go to church even though it just seems blah. You want more. You *need* more. You want that feeling of connection to something bigger—God? A community? A mission to change the world? Isn’t that what this Jesus thing is supposed to be about?

Sadly, there are times when I feel like the people in the pews get it better than the leaders in the church do.

I do believe it’s better than it was! At some point we have to own the fact that the church has done some horrific shit in the name of God. Many times we got it wrong. We’ve got to own that—and then move forward so that history doesn’t repeat itself.

To be fair, I think most of us got off on a really bad foot when it comes to religion. The idea of original sin screwed us up pretty good. I think it is a colossal mind-screw to say that we started off in the hole and that we suck. First off, I don’t think that was the beginning or “original” moment anyway. (It’s not even in the Bible. Anywhere.) If we are going to start at the beginning, then let’s start *at* the beginning! We *start* with, as Richard Rohr, Matthew Fox, and others like to call it, “original blessing.” That I can be down with. In the beginning it was good, good, good, until God created people and then—wait for it—it was *very* good! Now *that* sounds like good news.

We are learning that shaming is bad (duh) and that it never leads to change. (Not to mention that it was *never* done by Jesus—but I’ll get back to him later.) I want this book to alleviate guilt, create joy, and give people

permission to find God in new and different ways—even if that means sleeping in on Sundays.

I know of what I speak. Sunday morning worship services were never the happiest hour of my week. Even when I was an altar boy at St. Raphael's in metro Detroit, it just was not my gig. Having said that, I knew I loved God! Sunday mornings still aren't great—I'm not afraid to say it—and I'm a pastor! I know a lot of pastors who dread Sunday morning. They get it. They want it to be better, they know it isn't working, and yet they don't know what to do about it. I couldn't live like that. Once I had put in enough time “paying my dues,” and had bugged the right people enough, I got to start my own thing. I kinda said to hell with Sunday mornings. Not just because it wasn't working for *me*, but I knew it wasn't working for a lot of people. To this day—and I love my colleagues—I have not found a church to go to since I started my faith community eight years ago.

People don't really know what to call AfterHours. The people who actually *go* to AfterHours call it a church. But the people in the “business” of church (professional church people) always call it a “ministry.” “Your ministry is so . . . unique,” they say. It's like the minute we started feeding homeless people every week, we apparently stopped being a church.

I'll take being a ministry—and a church.

Our gathering time, which I and others call happy hour (OK, maybe just me) is literally happy hour (well, almost—we meet at seven o'clock. If you are still at happy hour at 7 p.m., you aren't at happy hour anymore—you are on your way to getting drunk. Call Uber). We meet in bars, we eat, we drink, we chat about life and God and Jesus, and we make lunches to feed our homeless neighbors. And the folks who come are just

like you. They are what I like to call spiritual independents: They are done with playing the church game; they just want to connect with other real people with real issues and do some real good in the world. They don't need a steeple and sermon to do that—and neither do you.

Kelly, one of the people on my leadership team, is agnostic, and she knows more about how the church runs than anyone I know. (She's flown across the country to study church administration. She knows her shit.) She is also one of the most loving people I know—that “Don't just say it, but roll up your sleeves and show it” kind of love. I'll take her over a thousand Christians who sit passively by and just point fingers.

I want to be clear from the get-go: I am not here to bash church. I am here to bash shitty church—and I think God would agree. (I can back up this claim with some Bible stuff, but that comes later.) It is actually the fact that I *do* care about church that leads me to make some of these comments. I think church can save this world—if we can figure out a way to do it right and in a meaningful way, if we can figure out how to serve the community and the planet and get on board with people who want to change the world and put more love into it.

Connection is the key. I think the desire to connect to something bigger is strong, even hardwired. We are born to be in community—authentic community, though, not one forced upon us. I think we also long to be a part of something that helps change the world for good. This can be feeding the poor, running a 5K to end cancer, or planting a tree. We want more. We want to feel that we matter. When we feel that connection to something bigger, whether it's a community or a cause, well, it's awesome.

And that is the goal for this book: to help you discover your bigger thing. The thing Søren Kierkegaard called “the idea for which I can live and die.”

I think religion can give us the framework, but I don’t think it’s necessarily a house everybody wants (or frankly, needs) to live in. Community and a connection to something higher can take *a lot* of forms.

If you have a faith community that you are digging like a ditch, put this book down and go be a part of it. (If you already bought the book, pass it on to someone who needs it.) But if you don’t have that community, if you don’t have that “thing,” then read on.

I think you might pick up what I’m puttin’ down.

I’m going to introduce you to the religious misfits and rogue disciples who make up our tiny, faithful, ass-kicking AfterHours community. I will be talking about Heather, who invited all of AfterHours to her burlesque class “final,” and how the group left her teacher speechless. I will be talking about Adam, who has two full sleeves of tattoos (many of which are visual illustrations of Bible passages . . . and one of which is one of our AfterHours logos!), and what drew him back to community after having been hurt by it years ago. I will be talking about our beautiful LGBTQ folks who give us a beauty and authenticity that we would have never had if they had not come to help teach us how to live in our own skin. I have learned from them that sometimes we need to walk away from communities and “friends” who don’t accept us for who we are. (Who can’t relate to that?)

I will also be telling stories from the park, where we hand out sack lunches and do Communion every day. These are stories of hope and healing and of the homeless who make me forget about my own stupid self-absorption and help me remember that there are people with prob-

lems *way* bigger than the fact that my wife, Laura, bought the wrong kind of cream cheese and the fact that we are running out of room in our fridge and had better “eat it up” this week. (*Then* I get pissed because I don’t get to eat out as much.) Basically, the homeless of my community remind me I can be a whiny little bitch.

See, in this book, I don’t really care if you “go to church” or not. I really don’t.

But man, I do care a lot that you find your “thing.” I really do care if you connect to something bigger than yourself and find a community of people who love you. I care a helluva lot that you find a way to stop searching for meaningless shit and instead find something that feeds your spirit and your soul. I care more than you know that you find that thing that Howard Thurman said “makes you come alive.”

If even one of you finds your way, or your direction, or your compass, or your peeps as a result of reading these words, it will all be worth it.

I start every chapter with a section called “The Spirituality of . . .” In these sections (and sprinkled throughout chapters), you will find stories of people who found their connection to something bigger through what might be considered “nontraditional avenues”: surfing, yoga, riding horses, even a good cigar. The purpose of these sections is to help you expand your understanding of connection to the holy by adding some roads that traditionally haven’t been associated with the sacred. In short, we want to get God out of the box that we stuck God in in the first place.

Oh, and there might be drink recipes at the end of every chapter. I was a bartender for ten years when I first started off in stand-up comedy. Enjoying a well-made cocktail is one of the great joys of my life. I might as well

pass on my knowledge to you. These are marked “for heathens’ eyes only.”

Before I go any further, I need to offer a huge disclaimer: It goes without saying (but I’m going to say it anyway) that *alcohol has created havoc in many people’s lives throughout history. It has ruined lives and families and has parted people with their money time and time again since the beginnings of history.*

So has religion.

But it is not alcohol or religion that has done this destruction. It is the misuse of these tools. Alcohol and religion in and of themselves aren’t dangerous. But their careless use can destroy.

So if you are a person who finds a good drink enriching to the soul, on with the cocktails.

FOR HEATHENS’ EYES ONLY

Old Fashioned

2 dashes Angostura bitters

1 sugar cube

(1 tsp. sugar = 1 sugar cube = 1 sugar packet)

2 oz. rye or bourbon

I use the New York City area code of 212 to remember the recipe: 2 dashes, 1 cube, 2 oz. It’s three moves. People tend to overthink this drink. Put sugar and bitters in a glass (muddle if using a sugar cube). Add a few ice cubes and the booze. Stir. Add a lemon or orange slice. Enjoy.