

Third Sunday of Lent

*Taking Jesus Seriously: The Sacred Practice of Neighboring*

1 Peter 2:9-10

These are strange days, aren't they? Everything feels out of kilter, not normal. You're watching church on a computer or a phone, instead of being in a familiar place with a roomful of people who are doing church with you. I'm standing here facing an empty sanctuary. We—all of us—are doing the best we can in a difficult and frightening time. We're using the tools of technology to hold on to each other while outside, there's a storm of fear that seems intent upon driving us apart. We're finding ways to connect with each other while there's a whole raft of good advice out there telling us that connection itself is inadvisable.

If we can let ourselves be a little playful about this situation for a moment, you could say we're a subversive band of disciples, searching for creative, inventive ways to stay faithful to God and connected to one another no matter what.

In a vastly different context, we're a little like those early Christians, who lived as an island of hardy faithfulness and community in the middle of political and economic storms—and epidemics— of the Roman Empire.

I've seen two books recently that talk about the impact of epidemics on the early Christian Church. One, a book called *The Rise of Christianity*, is by a historian named Rodney Stark. The other is another history, called *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity*, by Gary Ferngren. Both books trace the unlikely growth of the Christian movement in a time when pandemics ran rampant through the empire. In the second century during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, it was a 15-year epidemic that was probably smallpox. Almost a third of the population died from it, including the emperor himself. A hundred years later, there was another, equally devastating epidemic that swept through the empire. That one was probably measles.

Both books talk about how the Christian community grew, and got stronger, while all around it, people and the government were fighting disease in many of the same ways we're fighting coronavirus now. Medical knowledge was advanced enough even then to know that transmission of illness happened through person-to-person contact. So people stayed away from each other. City dwellers fled to the country, where there were fewer people. (I didn't read about a run on toilet paper, but it must have happened.) And so, the social bonds between people frayed and grew thin. People not only lost loved ones to death; they became isolated from one another.

But the Christians—the Christians acted differently from almost everyone else around them.

They didn't leave the cities when everyone else fled. Instead, they defied medical advice and stayed behind to take care of their neighbors. They weren't doctors, but they could offer simple

care—bread, water, their presence—to anyone who was seriously ill; to people who were part of their own Christian community and to people who were not.

It's hard to imagine doing that, isn't it? It might even seem foolish to us today. But the historians say the Christians acted that way for three reasons.

First, they were a people not afraid of death. They knew—they held a deep conviction—that their lives would continue even if they risked infection by caring for other people, even if they died.

Second, long before the epidemics struck, the Christian community had already developed an ethic of compassion. Visiting those who were poor or sick was deep in the bones of who they were. They knew that God had treated them with love and mercy. Their faith told them that every person is precious, worthy of God's care. And so, extending care toward others was simply a core Christian practice for them.

And finally, they believed that God is capable of miracles. Even when they didn't see one happening in front of them, they were convinced that miracles are possible.

For all these reasons, the early Christians were able to live, even in very dark times, with conviction and hope and compassion. They coped with illness and fear better than most other people did. That began to look like a miracle too, all by itself. Other people saw, and they wanted that life for themselves too.

That kind of faith and courage is just in the DNA of Jesus-followers. Over centuries, it has motivated Christians like Dr. Kent Brantly, who went to Liberia to treat Ebola patients just a few years ago. Dr. Albert Schweitzer in Africa, Father Damien in the leper colonies of Hawaii, Mother Teresa among the poor in India.

I'm not suggesting that you take up martyrdom, or disregard the warnings about coronavirus. I want you to be safe, and well. That's why we've made it impossible for you to come to church today. But I am suggesting to you something that there ought to be something different, distinctive, in the way Christians respond to the virus fear that is all around us.

'You are a people set apart,' the Apostle Peter said in the letter he wrote to a young church; 'a people who are God's own possession.' In the King James version of those verses, the words are translated, 'You are a *peculiar people*.' I love that. The truth is, Christians *should* be a peculiar people. We have the same reasons those first Christians did to live in a way no one else would understand: to not be undone by the fears that paralyze other people, to act with un-self-conscious love even at some risk to ourselves. Peter went on: 'You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into God's amazing light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.'

To live as God's peculiar people, people who have compassion at the core of their being, is going to take some creative adaptation in the weeks, and maybe months, ahead of us. Here at LAUMC, we started this season of Lent with a practice we were calling *200 Tables*, a suggestion

that you invite your neighbors over to dinner this spring. We're going to lay that campaign aside for now. We'll come back to it later. But all the reasons for you to reach out to your actual neighbors are still present, only there are more reasons now.

Now, all around us people are suffering not only from coronavirus, and not just from fear of it either. They're isolated from one another, from their work colleagues and friends, from the places they go to volunteer, sometimes even their family members. If they were lonely before, they are even more lonely now

It is a *peculiar people* who would raise their eyes from concern for their own health and well-being to look, even now, for what *other* people need.

It's a *peculiar people* who would trust God enough to believe in the possibility of miracles, and to remember that no matter what happens, our God has promised to stay with us.

I want to propose to you an ethic for this time, a set of behaviors to take us through however many weeks we are living in this out-of-the-ordinary way, gathering less, staying home more, seeing fewer people. Three practices that might help us live as a people who remember that we have been called out of darkness and into the light.

1. **Lean toward other people**, not away from them. If it can't be physically (and it can't), with a touch or a hug or a handshake, then find another way to connect. A phone call, a FaceTime visit, a knock on the door of a neighbor who might need some human contact today. In the church, while we're in this season of not being together weekly, your pastor is depending on you to look after one another, to stay in touch with the people who are usually your neighbors in the pew, to let us know if there's someone else you think we should stay in touch with. In every one of your communities—work, school, volunteer and social organizations—you can be the one who reaches out and offers connection.
2. **Practice extraordinary kindness in this time.** If you're at home more than usual, you have even more opportunities than usual to be irritated with the people you live with. Remember that this is a stressful and uncertain time. No one knows how to do this well. Even the people you know and love best are dealing with things they haven't told you about. So be kind. Be *exceptionally* kind.
3. **Speak with humility.** All around us there's an excess of over-confident speech right now. Predictions, pessimism, and blame, cynical commentary. What the world needs more of in this time is words of grace and forgiveness and humility. An acknowledgement that we're just going to have to live for a while with not knowing. A presumption that most people are acting out of good intent, most of the time. Let's be the peculiar people who don't have a strong opinion about everything, or react negatively to every bit of news.

Someone once said, "Ethics are how we behave when we decide we belong together." There's some great truth in that statement, I think. If we haven't decided that we belong together, if we're convinced that we're only responsible for our own health and well-being, there's not much beyond taking care of ourselves and our families that concerns us. We can do whatever we want.

But we do belong together. We belong to each other. Not just Christians; it's all God's children. And whether other people have made that decision or not, for us the decision has already been made. Our God made it for us, by acting out of the open-hearted love and compassion that is simply who God is.

We are a peculiar people, a people who belong to *that* God. To the *story* of that God in this world, in human life. One chapter of that story was written way back in the lives of those Roman Christians who stayed behind to care for their neighbors. Another chapter is being written right now. We may not be able to gather in big groups, or hug each other or shake hands, but we can be people who are carrying love and compassion into the world, even now, no matter what.