

Sermon for the Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Well, folks, I was hoping I wouldn't need to preach anything like this sermon again, but here we are, entering our 19th month since COVID hit us, and we're still dealing with the same issues as we were way back in March of 2020. We're starting to wonder if it's time to wear masks again. The CDC is releasing updates at blinding speed. I've been checking my email compulsively to see if the Bishop has made a round of decisions that will change how we do things. And you know what? I've had enough. I'm tired. I think that's true as a country. We've all had enough. We're all tired. The country itself is sick, still. If this pandemic were a war, we'd be the second-deadliest war in American history, behind only the Civil War and in less than half the time. The CDC just released a county-by-county map showing the current level of infections, and wouldn't you know it? The counties with the highest vaccination rate have the lowest infection rate, and vice versa. In other words, those places that responded to the first wave by taking on the personal responsibility borne by people living in community - those places actually are showing progress. And those places that were more focused on individual quote-unquote freedoms are doing very, very poorly. Now, we are fortunate to live in a county that has a higher than average vaccination rate, and we're doing ok. As of now, we're mostly in the clear. This may change, but most of us have done our part.

Of course, just like any time I've talked about vaccines, I want to make it clear: I know there are people who cannot be vaccinated. We have some of them in our community. That's a real thing. I'm not frustrated by them. What I am frustrated by are all those folks who could get vaccinated but just won't. We have some of them in our community, too. And I gotta say, if you're hearing this and you feel a little singled out, I'm ok with that. I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, but I am trying to get you to understand how all this stuff transcends politics and actually lands firmly in the arena of Christian responsibility. Remember, when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he named two: love God and love your neighbor. He didn't say much of anything about your personal freedom being greater than either of those.

Come to think of it, Jesus doesn't talk about your personal freedom in relation to much of anything at all except for his offer to free you from sin. But there's not much else to lean on scripturally about personal freedom. Hearing that, you may be wondering about the freedom to choose to believe in Jesus and follow his teachings. Well sure, but countless places in scripture, like Job, for example, give us stories where people encounter God and can't help but give themselves over, almost as though they didn't have a choice. Calvinists, which you won't see me leaning on all that often, Calvinists call this Irresistible Grace. And on the flip side, those folks who have the chance to respond to that Grace and don't, we always see them as the bad guys in our stories. The young rich man that couldn't be bothered to help the poor, the Pharisees constantly plotting against Jesus, the centurions that were just following orders. It would seem God is much more concerned with putting God and your neighbor first than in exercising your personal freedom.

Paul talks about the Christian community as being like a body knit together down to every ligament. And when it works properly, it promotes the body's growth built up in love. He's talking not just about human connection in Christ but also about sacrifice. What are you willing to sacrifice in order to build up the body? What are you willing to do to put your neighbor ahead of you? And how poorly does the body function, sick and broken and dying, when its parts refuse to serve each other? Paul also speaks of maturity and standing steadfast in what is true. Not in what we believe to be true, but in what is actually, verifiably true. Don't be blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. You know what is true. You do. Deep down, you know that you are making a decision.

There's an old saying I used to hear when I was growing up down in Arkansas, one of the hardest hit states with this Delta Variant, by the way, there's an old saying that goes like this: "The Civil War wasn't about slavery, it was about States' Rights." Growing up, I had that drilled into my head to the point that it almost made a weird sort of sense. Until one day somebody in my history class asked, "States' Rights to do what? States' Rights to own slaves." You choosing your personal convenience or your personal freedom today, when it comes to getting this vaccine? Yes, that's about your personal freedom. But your freedom to do what? As the rapid and increasingly deadly rise in cases across unvaccinated areas shows, it's your freedom to choose your convenience or preference over everyone else's right to live.

Now, I don't think that these vaccines are miracles on the order of manna from Heaven, not exactly. But I do think the advances in vaccine development over the past decades that have led to the quick and safe responses today are miraculous in and of themselves. One of our hymns even sings of the faithfulness of scientists with their "loud boiling test tubes!" Episcopalians as a rule believe in the ability of God to work through us in whatever our occupations, including the medical world. And in the past year and a half, it's the medical world that has shown us the most faithful acts of service, self-denial, and sacrifice we may ever see. And yet, we dishonor their Christ-like sacrifice and service when we refuse vaccines we could take. They are begging us, literally begging us to do this simple thing, and too many care not.

It's the simplest thing, folks. When the Hebrews were stuck in the wilderness, they struggled at times to find themselves connected to each other. And they needed, desperately needed sustenance. As a nation, they were starving and lost and discouraged. They were tired. And God heard their pleas and God sent them what they needed. Manna, soft as the dew and filling as any meal. It may not have been a New York strip, but it was enough.

And folks, these vaccines, they are enough. We are a country starving for normalcy and connection and even freedom. And we've got something that can fix that, that can get us there and, oh yeah, also keep more people from dying. Maybe you're a bit safer, too, but the real thing is, you are being presented with an opportunity to serve your neighbor, and through them, to serve God. The choice is yours, folks. But I will tell you this: the Christian choice is absolutely to serve your neighbor.