

Contagious Aliveness

Welcome to our third weekly “Worship on a Web Page.” We’ve tried to provide the basics of a normal Good Shepherd Baptist Sunday morning worship service for you, starting with a gathering hymn, a Call to Worship, a hymn that responds to that call, our Lenten Candle litany for the week, a hymn before the scripture reading, the reading itself, this sermon, and, finally, our closing hymn, responding to the sermon. If you’ve not already listened to or participated in those things before the sermon, you might want to stop this video right here and go back and do that, if you have web access. We think you’ll find it takes you on the journey that you would have experienced here in this Sanctuary if it were possible for us to all be together.

The reason we’re not all here together, of course, is a very real and serious concern about contagion. I hope that none of us have crossed the line from concern to fear, which is a rather different thing. Concern regarding the coronavirus and its spread is a very reasonable thing. We understand from responsible news reporting that COVID-19 is not just this year’s flu strain. This disease is more easily spread – the virus expelled by a cough or on hands that have touched infected mucous can stay alive on hard surfaces for up to four hours on copper, up to 24 hours on cardboard and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel. Those are the findings of scientists from the National Institutes of Health, the CDC, UCLA and Princeton University, as published in “The New England Journal of Medicine.” And COVID-19 is far more dangerous than the flu. Those who become ill are often getting sicker than those in a flu epidemic and the mortality rate is much higher. Those who are over 60 or who, like me, have compromised immune systems from diabetes, heart disease, medical treatments, or a host of other issues, are particularly at risk. So, it makes sense for us all to practice social distancing, including not gathering for worship. This is a rare time when we actually show love best by staying away from each other, at least in person.

But there are things perhaps even worse than disease that are contagious. This morning, I want us to look to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew’s great compilation of Jesus’ teachings, to learn about the dangers of contagions that may leave the body untouched while killing the soul. But we’ll also find in our scripture passage from this morning the good news about God’s love, which is even more contagious than those evils. In fact, Brian McLaren says that the result of being “infected” by God’s love is that we experience “contagious aliveness.” More on that in a few minutes.

If you’ve listened to or read last week’s sermon, you may remember that we looked at some spiritual disciplines, charity, prayer, and fasting, in which some people take an excess of pride. That was true in Jesus’ time and it’s still true today, unfortunately. But misplaced pride is only one thing that can separate us from God and lead us out of the Way of Jesus. Fear is just as destructive. And, make no mistake, it’s fear that drives the dangerous contagions that Jesus is talking about in Matthew 6:10 – 7:5. And both of the contagions, that of worry over material things and that of judgmentalism boil down to a very basic fear: the fear that God will not do as God has promised.

Jesus begins this teaching with a warning about focusing on treasure on earth as opposed to treasure in heaven. I wouldn’t read too much into his metaphor of treasures in heaven – the theology of our good deeds being carefully stored up by God is a little sketchy – but we all know what it means. Down home, we talk about people getting stars in their crown. My mama, I’m

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sure, has a beautiful crown in heaven due to the number of times she said to me, when I was at my most obstreperous, “Christopher, there is going to be an extra star in my crown in heaven for dealing with you.” But what Jesus was really getting at here is that an obsession with money and possessions will only distract us from the things that truly matter in life: kindness, generosity, the pursuit of justice for all, living as God meant for us to. Meanwhile, those earthly possessions are subject to all kinds of dangers – insects, rust, thieves. But generosity doesn’t grow stale and kindness doesn’t tarnish. No one can steal from us our ability to love or the love that we have received. Those things are safe and eternal.

When we focus on those material things, when we let them become the “light in our eyes,” we are, in actuality, worshipping them, when our worship is rightly due only to God, our Loving Creator and Sustainer. There’s not much good that comes of that focus on material things. One of the great lessons of one of my favorite books, The Lord of the Rings, is how the greed for power, symbolized by the One Ring, twists and darkens those who succumb to it. The Ring twists the hobbit, Smeagol, into the murderous Gollum. It infects the innocent Bilbo, a truly terrifying moment in Peter Jackson’s film of The Fellowship of the Ring. The lust for the ring even overtakes the heroic Frodo at the climax of The Return of the King. Strangely, it is the greed of Gollum for the Ring which leads to its destruction, much as Gandalf had predicted. But it is dangerous to assume that the effects of greed will lead to salvation.

Speaking of “storing up treasures on earth,” it has made me sad and occasionally angry to witness the spread of hoarding caused by fear of the Coronavirus. In some ways, it’s a really good thing that meetings and services are not taking place in our little building because I’ve no idea how I would restock our dwindling supply of paper towels and toilet paper. In the next week or so, I’m going to be driven to the grocery store because the staples we stocked up on at home back at the beginning of the month are running out. What will I find? I’m worried about all of those folks who, for one reason or another, need to grocery shop frequently to have a supply of food and other necessities. Reports of empty shelves are widespread. This is just one sad outcome of the contagion of fear.

But let’s face it; we get focused on material things and we hoard out of fear of not getting our fair share because we do not trust in what Jesus teaches in verses 25-34 of chapter 6. Don’t worry about these things, he tells us. “Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.” As I’ve told you all before, most of my life I have made the big decisions, such as employment, based on where I thought God was leading me. A couple of times, I’ve panicked, given in to fear, and made decisions based on money. It’s not worked out well when I’ve taken the latter course. But it has worked out well when I’ve followed God and my heart. As Tom Stoppard wrote in the filmscript of “Shakespeare in Love,” “Strangely enough, it all turns out well... it’s a mystery.” I’m convinced, though, that if we utilize the gifts that God has given us, including that of a sound mind, we need not fear. It will all turn out well. Or, as Jesus said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Jesus, of course, uses the beautiful and rightly famous metaphors of flowers and birds to teach about reliance on God. “Look at the birds of the air... your heavenly Father feeds them... Consider the lilies of the field... even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of

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these.” A modern American follower of Jesus and author wrote one of my favorite poems along these same lines. I’ve read this from the pulpit before, but listen again to Wendell Berry and “The Peace of Wild Things:”

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

When we fail to trust God and give in to the contagion of fear where material goods are concerned, we may find that it’s just that little bit easier to give in to another contagion: judgmentalism. Why do we feel the need to judge others? Generally speaking, it’s so we can feel that we are better than them. Why do we need to feel superior to our brothers and sisters? Because we want to make sure that when’s God judgment comes, we won’t be at the bottom of the list. I recently read an article that suggested this is why some Christians feel so strongly about the existence of a physical hell and eternal punishment. Deep down we hope that if God is busy punishing someone else, he (and I use that pronoun advisedly) will be too busy to get to us. It’s a little like being out on the playground when somebody kicks a ball through a window. We may be all too ready to rat out our playmate to the principal in hopes that nobody will mention that we were among those who dared the playmate to kick the ball in the first place. Judgmentalism is such an ugly little sin because its roots are in fear, the fear that God doesn’t really love us unconditionally. And like fear of scarcity and its companion, hoarding, judgmentalism and the fear that God doesn’t love us is contagious. When we exhibit it, we spread it.

I do want to point out that Jesus differentiates between judgment and discernment in verse 6 of chapter 7. “Pearls Before Swine” is a delightful comic strip, if you read the *Seattle Times*, but it’s a lousy life choice. When you give good things to folks who are caught up in the contagions of fear, they will likely turn on you. We get pretty good signals in life about who we can trust, who is willing to love us, and who we can’t trust, who is out to hurt us. As current wisdom says, “When somebody shows you who they are, believe them.” Or as Jesus said in another scripture, “Be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.” Be ready to love others but be smart about the fact that not everyone will reciprocate properly. Don’t judge but be discerning. Don’t live in fear from COVID-19 but wash your hands and stay home.

As I said at the beginning, the good news is that there is something just as contagious as fear or judgement, just as contagious as a virus. And that something is love. Jesus reminds us that we are mirrors of God’s love, slightly imperfect but able to show the essence of what is true: “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks

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for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

We may not be able to love in the measure that God loves, to love everyone unconditionally, regardless of how they respond to us. But what we can do is enough, and it is contagious. Jesus put it this way: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” We call it the Golden Rule. If you doubt my description of this truth as contagious, consider this: somewhere in my office, there is a poster given to me by my friend, Rev. Steven Greenebaum, the founder of the Living Interfaith Church, which also meets in this space when such things are possible. On that poster is a statement from every major human faith – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and several others. Each is a restatement of this core truth of love. If we treat others in the way we would also wish to be treated, then we have fulfilled all the wisdom of all the religions of the world. Love is always the right choice. And love begets love. That’s the life that God has always had in mind for us. That’s what Jesus called abundant life. It’s contagious.

Brian McLaren puts it this way: “...when we learn from the songbirds and wildflowers to live by faith in God’s abundance, we collaborate and share. We watch out for others rather than oppress each other. We desire what God desires—for all to be safe, for all to be truly alive—so we work for the common good. When that happens, it’s easy to see how everyone will be better off. Contagious aliveness will spread across the land!”

My dear sisters and brothers, I do so wish we could be together this morning. Delivering a sermon to a camera is just not the same as delivering it to you. I was never much of a camera actor in my life in the theatre. I much preferred the live stage, where I could hear and sense reaction to what I was saying and doing, even if I couldn’t see much of it. I never wore my glasses on stage, so my circle of vision was limited to about five feet in front of me. But we have good reasons not to be together this morning. COVID-19, which could easily be fatal to some of us, is spread so easily. All it takes is a droplet, which can lurk on a surface, active, for as much as three days. But as we consider those droplets of contagion, we should also consider the tiny acts of love that we can still do for each other and for others. It’s an act of love to maintain proper social distancing. It’s an act of love to check in with your friends and neighbors by phone or e-mail. It’s an act of love for those who are healthy to run errands for those who are at risk. Sure, it only takes a droplet to get sick but think of the song that we all love that we would sing together if we could be here: It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing; That’s how it is with God’s love, once you’ve experienced it: you spread God’s love to everyone, you want to pass it on.”

May God continue to use us, even in this time of social distancing and sheltering in place, to spread God’s love. May we all be contagiously alive. Amen.