

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
March 15, 2020
Entering the Passion of Jesus: Picturing Ourselves in the Story
Lent 3: The Teaching: Risking Challenge
Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

Let me begin by welcoming those who are watching today on our Live Stream or who may be listening to this portion of our service at a later time. We are glad that you are able to be with us and we pray that by providing this opportunity, you are able to worship with us wherever you are today.

I never could have imagined weeks ago when I set up the Lenten worship series and had “Risking Challenge” as the title for today’s sermon, that we would be facing the kind of profound challenges we are now facing globally. I anticipated that this would be a simple sermon about how Jesus was challenged by people who wanted to get rid of him and how he did some fancy word maneuvering to evade the traps they had set for him with their questions. I thought the most difficult part of the sermon would be Jesus’ last words about giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and giving to God what belongs to God. However, the world has changed in the several weeks since I first decided to use this series.

At the same time, I have always believed that our Scriptures are God’s Living Word and that they speak to us not just historically but that they speak to us also today and sometimes in surprising ways. As I studied and prepared for this week, I felt that God was speaking to today as well.

To explain that, first, let me set the stage a little. It was about Tuesday of the week we call Holy Week, or three days before Jesus would be crucified. As our fictional observer noted, the Roman government and

the temple authorities were interested in Jesus and both wanted him quieted. He was asked several questions that were designed to trap him; the kind where any answer was the wrong answer for someone.

When asked if it were lawful to pay taxes, either a “yes” or a “no” would get him in trouble. If he said no, then the Romans would have arrested him for sedition. If he said yes, then the people listening would think he was a Roman collaborator – and that was a very unpopular place to be for a Jewish man in first century Palestine.

As he frequently did, Jesus asked other questions and managed to use it as a teaching moment and kept himself out of trouble. There are many things I’d like to tell you about the coinage and about how this is not a simple question of the separation of church and state as we are often quick to assume, but today I am more interested in what we can learn from Jesus method and how this relates to some important challenges facing us today.

At the end of this particular questioning session, or attempt to entrap him, Jesus ends us putting the question back on them by challenging both his questioners and those listening or observing to determine what they think belongs to God and what they think belongs to Caesar, i.e. the government. It is important to note, that Caesar – more than a person here, but a title for the ruler – was proclaimed to be both the “Son of the Divine” and “High Priest”. For Jewish people this was blasphemy.

Jesus already knew that he would die. He had been telling his disciples this and they had not understood, but he used every minute he had to continue to teach those who really wanted to learn. These teachings are important to us today as we continue to face new challenges.

Amy-Jill Levine points out that we should note 3 things about the way

Jesus handled this and most questions put to him. First, he always tried to figure out what was behind the question – to understand the motive for the question. Secondly, he knew his scriptures well and used them. Thirdly, he made sure that for those who really were interested in what he had to say that he responded not only with kindness and respect but also with empathy.ⁱ

This was Jesus method of teaching and it was his way of facing the challenging questions for which there was either no right answer, or certainly not any easy answer. Today, we face many challenging questions as well, and I believe that Jesus' approach can help us face them.

Some of us may have personal challenges and the many questions that go with them. Should I stay at my job or look for a different one? Can a relationship be saved, or improved or not? Should I delay retirement because of the volatility of the market?

As a church we face many questions and challenges as well. The Next Chapter team is helping to lead us through this maze. Dan and Deborah have spoken about some of this and the way we are trying to approach some of them.

For all of us, right now, I think the biggest challenge on most of our minds is how we deal with all the information and misinformation about the coronavirus or COVID-19. Last week I urged us not to shake hands and to pay attention to hand washing, and other precautions. This morning, you see other precautions and adaptations coming into play. Some of these have good reasons that go far beyond the coronavirus, but that is the reason for implementing them right now.

But the bigger question for me today, is how our faith influences our response to the Coronavirus and what we can learn from Jesus about

responding to the challenges in life and this one specifically. Let me begin by saying that each of us has our own circumstances that need to be considered as we make decisions about how we respond to the much bigger crisis.

If we remember the cues that Jesus gives us in dealing with these challenges, we will look for the reason behind the questions that are being asked. Are they questions for information? Is someone looking for permission and assurance that staying home and self-quarantining is what is best for that individual – maybe not because he or she has been exposed to someone with the virus but because the person has health issues that mean that exposure would be extremely dangerous. Is the questioner afraid and hoping that there will be a word that offers hope or comfort? Look for the reasons behind the questions and challenges.

I believe that our scripture can be a great help to us as we try to live out our faith during a global pandemic. When asked what the greatest law was, Jesus quoting scripture said to Love God with all our heart, mind, and soul and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Loving our neighbor means that we will make decisions that will keep others safe. It means that we will not allow the most vulnerable among us to be left to themselves. We will work for and insist that testing be available for anyone who should be tested. It will mean that people shouldn't have to go to work when sick and contagious because they won't get paid and staying home means they can't pay for food or rent.

Even if we want to, we can no longer believe or try to pretend that we are not connected to the rest of the world and everyone in it. Some find it more comfortable to have an isolationist point of view and think that we only have to take care of ourselves, but COVID-19 has brought this fallacy

home to us in ways that other world events may not have. In our global world, we are absolutely affected by things that happen in places where we may have never been.

As we walk through this, we trust that God will see us through it. God will probably not magically protect us from getting sick but we can have absolute confidence that God will not leave us alone. Remember the 23rd Psalm that proclaims, “Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me.”ⁱⁱ We know that God cares about each and every one of us.

Jesus reminds us of that in the 6th chapter of Matthew’s gospel, where he tells people not to worry about their life, what we’ll eat, or what we’ll drink or wear. “Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Worrying, or panicking, doesn’t help us at all. Being realistic, responsible, and taking appropriate precautions does help us and everyone else. 2nd Timothy 1:7 reminds us that “God didn’t give us a spirit that is timid, but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.”^{iv}

On Thursday, Adam Taylor published an article on the Sojourner’s website titled, “The Time to Act like a community is now.” In it he quoted, Howard Markel who observed, “What binds us is a microbe, but it also has the power to separate us.” Taylor pointed out that “We’re a very small community whether we acknowledge it or not, and this proves it. The time to act like a community is now.”^v

We have received word from Bishop Devadhar and others that one of the ways that people have responded to the COVID-19 outbreak has

included acts of racism and comments made to Asian members of our conference. We can assume that this is happening in other places as well. In a spirit of fear and a desire to blame “the other”, there are those who are blaming and exhibiting fear towards people who appear Asian. For these people it doesn’t matter if they are Chinese, or more importantly, it doesn’t matter if they have been anywhere near anyone who has been exposed to the virus – it is simply their response of fear and racism eager to lash out in blame to someone.

Last Sunday, a retired pastor posted words that he said were written by his pastor, Mike Coburn. They speak to us today. “The world shrinks before our very eyes. Viruses skip from here to there in no time; desperate people knock on our doors without ceasing; icebergs melt and seas rise, and like it or not, we’re all in this together. God is speaking one more time (one last time?), as so often before: Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly and for God’s sake, love one another!”^{vi}

This may seem like one of the biggest challenges we have ever faced, and it definitely is a big challenge. I don’t have answers. I don’t even know what questions to ask, but I do know that we are not alone as we face this.

Steve Garnaas Holmes in his daily meditation on Thursday, followed Jesus method of looking to scripture first. He reminded us of the story from Exodus of the Hebrew people wandering in the desert. At one point, people were complaining because they were thirsty and Moses was told by God to “strike the rock and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”

Steve used that scripture to speak to the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to do it. He wrote, “When it’s hard, and you don’t know how,

and the need exceeds your capacity, it isn't yours that matters. It's God's"^{vii} Did you hear that? It's not our capacity, our ability that matters. It's okay that we don't know what to do. It's okay that we don't know even know what questions to ask. It's not our ability, our knowledge, our wisdom that matters. It is God's and God does not ever desert us.

Steve continues, "When your emptiness looms, your terrible weakness dominates, when you are an empty water jug, then – perfect – you are ready as a vessel for the mystery of God.

"When there is no hope and you are in a wilderness without drink, strike the rock. The water comes from beyond your imagining. Yes, there is no water, and besides you don't know how to strike the rock. Yes, strike the rock anyway.

"When you are called upon to serve beyond what is humanly possible, trust this, child of God, and strike the rock."^{viii} Whatever happens, we can reach out to God and do as God would have us do.

Steve's meditation reminded me also of the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and later Joseph was the person who told the Egyptian Pharaoh how to prepare for 7 years of famine. His plans saved the lives of many, including his own father and the brothers who had sold him. When he and his brothers were reunited, Joseph told them that although they had meant their actions for harm, God had used them for good.

Many years later, Jesus was put to death on a cross. The actions were meant to silence him. The actions were meant to scare those who had followed him. But God used it for good. Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead. The frightened disciples became outspoken and brave people who carried on the work of Jesus for about 2,000 years, even to this

day. What was meant to silence, emboldened. What was meant to destroy, became something new and the world has never been the same since.

We don't know what the future holds. We don't know how this virus will impact our lives and the lives of those we love. We don't always know what to do and that's okay. This may be the last time for a while that any of us gather physically together for worship but that will not destroy our community or our faith. We will find other ways to communicate with each other and with those who may never have looked to God but might today or in the future be searching for meaning and hope.

We will find ways to use technology to stay in touch. And for those who don't have access to some of this technology, we will use telephones, and maybe even snail mail. We may all soon be self-quarantined or quarantined by mandate, and I pray, with you, that this will help prevent the spread of the virus, but it will not and must not change the reality of how connected we are.

“COVID-19 is testing our understanding and commitment to our interdependence as the Body of Christ.” But 1 Corinthians 12, that marvelous chapter about the Body of Christ being like the human body where each part is interconnected, helps remind us that when one part suffers, all the parts suffer and every part of the body is important.

We in the faith community can and should play an important role in this by telling the truth, and by being models of how to live in the middle of fear and the unknown. Let us follow the model of Jesus and look for the reason behind the question. Let us study and know our scripture and help it inform our actions and attitudes. Let us be sure that we speak to people with kindness, respect, and empathy. Let us ask Christ how we are to

respond to all of the challenges in our lives, and especially to this new pandemic challenge and then let us respond as Christ would lead us.

Let me close by sharing a prayer that Rabbi Naomi Levy wrote, “A Prayer of Hope During this Pandemic.” Let us pray.

“We are frightened, God. Worried for our loved ones, worried for our world. Helpless and confused, we turn to you, seeking comfort, faith, and hope. Teach us, God, to turn our panic into patience, and our fear into acts of kindness and support. Our strong must watch out for the weak. Our young must take care of our old. Help each one of us to do our part to halt the spread of this virus.

“Send strength and courage to the doctors and nurses in the front line of this battle. Fortify them with the full force of their healing powers. Send wisdom and insight to the scientists working day and night across the world to discover healing treatments. Bless their efforts, God. Fill our leaders with the wisdom and the courage to choose wisely and act quickly. Help us God, to see that we are one world, One people, who will rise above this pandemic together.

“Send us health, God. Watch over us. Grace us with Your love. Bless us with your healing light. Hear us God. Heal us God. Amen.”^{ix}

ⁱ Levine, Amy-Jill Entering the Passion of Jesus. P.66

ⁱⁱ Psalm 23:4 CEB

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 6:26-27 CEB

^{iv} 2 Timothy 1:7 CEB

^v Taylor, Adam. Sojourners, 3/12/2020

^{vi} Posted on FaceBook on 3/8/30 by Duane Clinker, attributed to Mike Coburn

^{vii} Garnaas Holmes, Steve. Unfolding Light. 3/12/2020

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Levy, Naomi Rabbi. Shared on Face Book by Arnold Mills UMC and by me.