

Reconciling in a Pandemic

2 Corinthians 5:16-20

Sermon by Dan Schrock

September 27, 2020

Let's begin with our scripture text from 2 Corinthians 5.

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

I

Today is the third in a series of four Sundays on being the church during a pandemic. The people who planned this series observed that, “our congregation’s routines, structures, and gatherings have been disrupted.” They asked the pastors to craft sermons about “the practices, rituals, and structures that will serve us well into the future.” The particular focus they choose for today is the reconciling ministry of the church.

By now we’ve lived with Covid-19 long enough to know some of its social effects: a loss of loved ones, a rise in political and racial tensions, an increase in economic enmity. Social relationships in the United States are being damaged in dreadful ways.

We could easily think this is a brand new situation in the history of the world—that we humans have never encountered a disaster such as Covid-19, and that the church of Jesus has never before dealt with this kind of massive, widespread illness. We might suppose this pandemic is an unprecedented phenomenon.

However, this is wrong. The truth is that throughout history, we humans have survived many pandemics and epidemics. Consequently, over the centuries we the church have had lots of practical experience in witnessing to Jesus while people around us are sick, stressed, and dying. For Christians like us, pandemics are old hat. We have lots of professional experience with crises like this one.

II

One of the most prominent spiritual practices in the Bible is what we might call “cultivating sanctified memory.” Let’s put that in plain English. It simply means remembering—remembering what happened in the past; remembering how you acted, and what you thought, and how you felt in the past; and above all, remembering what God did in the past. One of the loveliest examples of remembering is told in Deuteronomy 26:5ff, where God urges the Hebrew people to remember their past. In this case, God urges them to remember how Sarah and Abraham wandered around in the desert, how their descendants went down to slavery in Egypt, and how with a mighty hand God brought them up out of slavery. The purpose of holy remembering is to let the good of the past influence how we live in the future. In Deuteronomy, this act of holy remembering leads to worship and praise, to thanksgiving and generosity. Remembering the good of the past is a powerful spiritual practice because it makes us more courageous in the future.

Therefore in our present pandemic, what might we want to remember about the past? Specifically, what widespread illnesses did our churchly ancestors live through, and how did they respond? What did they do that might inspire us now? I’d like to share with you two examples from Christian history.

III

The first example comes from the Roman Empire in the year 165. We don’t know for sure what this epidemic was—maybe smallpox, maybe something else—but we do know it was deadly and lasted 15 years. The epidemic got so bad that the most famous

Roman doctor of that era, a man named Galen, fled the city of Rome and took refuge out on his country estate. Pagans who remained in the cities were so scared of getting sick that they carried the dead and dying out to the streets and stacked them into piles. Then caravans of carts and wagons came by, loaded up the dead bodies, hauled them out of town, and dumped them.

Some years later, in about the year 251, another epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Again we don't know what caused it, but the pagans responded as they did before: they fled the cities when they could, and otherwise avoided sick people as much as possible. During this particular epidemic, Bishop Dionysius, a northern African who lived in the city of Alexandria, described how the pagans behaved. He wrote: "At the first onset of the disease, [the pagans] pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest [family members], throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treating the unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease."

In contrast to this appalling pagan behavior, the Christian church tried to take a different approach. Before I tell you what the Christians did, keep in mind the state of medical science 1800 years ago. Back then, physicians knew nothing about bacteria and viruses, let alone what to do about them. Penicillin, steroids, and aspirin did not yet exist—basically none of the treatments we take for granted today. Frankly, doctors just could not do much for their patients.

So what did some of the Christians do? How did they respond to this widespread suffering? They turned themselves into nurses. Instead of fleeing the cities, they stayed and helped. They took food and water to the sick. They washed the sick, changed their bedding and bandages, and comforted them as much as possible.

These simple nursing strategies were enormously effective at saving lives. Of course not every patient survived, but many did. Medical historians say that basic nursing can greatly reduce the rate of mortality, possibly by as much as one-half to two-thirds.¹ As

¹ This material comes from Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 114-119.

you might guess, these Christian nurses helped their own family members as well as members of their own church, just as you would expect. But here's the interesting part: these Christian nurses also helped sick pagans who worshiped Janus, Jupiter, Saturn, or one of the dozens of other Roman gods.

Now at one level, these Christians were just doing good old-fashioned nursing. But at another level, they were deeply engaged in a ministry of reconciliation. To appreciate what these Christians were doing, you need to remember that Christianity was not even legally allowed in the second and third centuries. In those days the Roman Empire frequently made life miserable for Christians, and sometimes killed them. Christian nursing was therefore a courageous ministry of reconciliation. In the words of Paul, these brave Christian nurses were ambassadors of God's reconciliation. As Cyprian, the northern African bishop of Carthage, asked his fellow Christians, "What credit is it to us Christians if we just help Christians? Anyone can do that. We have to help not just the household of faith, but everyone."²

Now here's the thing: the pagans noticed. The pagans noticed that nursing worked. They noticed that when Christians helped, more people survived. For pagans, this made Christianity much more attractive. It softened their hearts and made them feel more friendly toward Christians. Imagine if you were a pagan, let's say a worshipper of the goddess Diana, and a Christian saved your life by kindly caring for you during one of the epidemics. I'll bet that afterward you'd be motivated to treat your Christian neighbors a lot better than you did before.

This is how reconciliation works. Sometimes, you just have to be kind.

IV

The second example of Christian behavior I hope you will remember comes from the year 1665. That year in England, the bubonic plague broke out in several cities, including London. That fall, a cloth merchant in a small village called Eyam ordered bolts

² Quoted by Philip Jenkins,
<https://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=218427>

of cloth from London. No one in the village of Eyam knew it, but when the cloth arrived from London, it had fleas rolled up inside. When the cloth was unwrapped, the fleas escaped and started biting the villagers, giving them the plague. The first person to die was a man named George Viccars. By the end of 1665, 42 villagers were dead.

Virtually everyone in the village was Christian, but they were divided into two acrimonious camps. One camp was led by the Anglican parson, William Mompesson. The other camp was led by the Puritan minister, Thomas Stanley. These two pastors, and their two camps, basically didn't agree on anything. At the end of the year one of these pastors, William Mompesson, decided that to stop the plague from spreading beyond the village, the village had to come together and quarantine itself. So he walked over to the house of Thomas Stanley, his religious opponent, and persuaded Thomas that they should work together to convince the villagers to self-quarantine. So that's what the two pastors did. Reluctantly, but willingly, the villagers agreed with their pastors, knowing full well that by quarantining themselves, a bunch of them would die. They agreed to stay in the village, to and travel nowhere, so that no one outside the village would catch the plague.

It got bad. By August 1666, five or six villagers were dying every day. A woman named Elizabeth Hancock buried six of her children plus her husband in the space of eight days. Even William Mompesson, the parson who had the idea for the quarantine, lost his wife Catherine to the plague; she was only 27 years old. The last villager to die was Abraham Morten, who passed away on November 1, 1666. In a little over a year, 260 people died in that village, out of an estimated population of between 350 and 800 people.³ But the plague did not spread to others outside the village.

Remarkably, these Anglican and Puritan Christians, normally opposed to each other, reconciled with each other to unite around a common mission. Even if it meant a bunch of them would die in the process, they would stop the spread of the epidemic to others. And so their courageous decision saved the lives of many other people in that region of England.

³ David McKenna, "Eyam Plague: The Village of the Damned," <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-35064071>.

V

Two very different stories of Christians who chose the ministry of reconciliation in very different contexts. In our pandemic of 2020, the context is a little different. Yet the invitation to join God's ministry of reconciliation remains.

Here and now, how can you be an ambassador for Christ? What is the reconciling work that you are called to do?