

Rector's Sermon: 5 July

It has been a wearying time to be the church lately. The grief over the loss of so many lives to the coronavirus is a hard weight to bear in our families, in our communities, in our nation, in our world, in our churches. The loss of jobs and livelihoods is devastating. The inability to meet face to face, to congregate, to embrace, to comfort, and to console in person is nothing but a loss – a deep, aching loss.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

So many of our churches during this pandemic have been extraordinary. Livestreaming worship, recording sermons, creating virtual choirs, checking in with people via telephone, leading online Bible studies, and attending zillions of zoom meetings.

So how are we feeling? What are our burdens? What do we need to offer to God, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light?

I don't know about you, but during this pandemic I have found learning new technologies at times bewildering. I spend hours upon hours recording and uploading a fifteen-minute sermon or a four-minute hymn and wonder how can this be. Online meeting formats seem designed to suck the life out of people, leaving many depleted, especially when one has been on Zoom for 3 hours!

The pandemic has exposed truths about nation and world that are hard to face. Inequalities in health care provision. Disparities in educational opportunities. The persistent and pervasive racism in our society.

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One pervasive burden has been how religion has gradually been defined as a commodity fighting for space amongst other commodities. This temptation is something we need to be alert to, for as Christians we worship the Lord who is the source of all truth and value and so I hope we reject the commodification of all things. We have learned during this pandemic that we can't put a price tag on truth, goodness, and beauty; on life, relationships, and love; on forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace; on all the things that we have rediscovered make life worth living.

Another burden is the danger of religion becoming more and more seen of as a purely private matter. The so-called father of modern theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, said that Christian faith was not a matter of knowing or doing. Rather, Christian faith was, at heart, a feeling: a sense and taste for the infinite; a feeling of absolute dependence.

I struggle to see how he can justify this view. The Gospels don't give us much insight into the interior lives and feelings of Jesus and the disciples, but my goodness do we not witness a lot of doing. Jesus moves and acts in the public space, healing, teaching, feeding, proclaiming, forgiving, loving. It was for this reason he was turned over to the Roman authorities and publicly executed. The kingdom of God is announced, enacted, and embodied in public. The Gospel is not about the private life of Jesus, but the politics of Jesus.

So we must push back against the privatization of Christianity. But in doing so we must be careful not to adopt the politics and practices of the modern nation-state. We must know better than this. If politics is about humans living in a storied community with a mission that enables them to flourish and to discover their true destiny, then the body politic is the body of Christ. Let's be clear, the massive machinery of the modern nation state is not designed to form people of Christian character.

So let's confidently reaffirm that the Christian faith is not private. It is political as well as personal. It is about building the Body of Christ, a fundamentally communal public act.

The politics of Jesus' love and justice must first to be lived out in the Body of Christ. The most eloquent witness we may make to the state is the public display of a community that is formed by the story of Jesus, embodied in lives poured out in service to God and the world. The politics of the church is to be lived out in witness and mission. We are offering another vision of how to live. We have nothing to offer if we are not already living out that vision.

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Another burden that this pandemic has shone a light on is the danger of the church's ministry of pastoral care being reduced to simply another form of therapy. Therapy is more concerned with the techniques of treatment than with the goals of human life. Therapists help not by necessarily judging the rightness or wrongness of people's visions of the good life, but rather, through the practices of presence, acceptance, listening, and empathy, they help people in their journeys toward healing and wholeness. All of the above are vital components of pastoral care but pastoral care is more than therapy. It is the cure of souls.

Of course, priests and pastors learn hugely from therapeutic techniques. Pastoral care provision needs to be competent and must be safe. The horrific abuse scandals are a testament to that. Yet the cure of souls is more than therapy. Much of the pain in modern life is not only caused by people hitting roadblocks on the way to achieving their self-appointed goals, but also because people don't necessarily acknowledge the goods they should seek, the values they should cherish, the vices they should abhor, and the virtues they should practice.

Late modern life is chaotic. Our suffering is not just emotional, but also cognitive. There are ways that are life-giving and there are ways that are death-dealing. Pastoral care is not helping people become more well-adjusted to the ways of denial, degradation, destruction, death.

In the cure of souls, healing is about reconciliation, God's reconciliation. It is not about adapting better to the problems and perplexities of late modern life, but rather about participating in the story of God's redemption, the God who brought the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

The pandemic has revealed the burden on churches to reduce pastoral care to therapy. Churches, communities of faith, priests, pastors, and other caregivers are being called upon to help people to deal with the staggering amount of death, loss, grief, and suffering unleashed by the spread of the coronavirus. We are being asked to help people "get through" these tough times until life "returns to normal" and we can get "back to business."

At this point the alarm bells should be ringing! Pastoral care is not simply applying spiritual bandages. As a Church we should be asking what is the "normal" and the "business" we are returning to? Should we help accommodate people to the despoilment of creation, the sin of racism and the human wreckage of wealth inequalities?

We are called to draw attention to the signs of God's Kingdom. We know that true healing only comes from the God who promises a new heaven and a new earth, a time when the veil that separates the nations will be pulled back, when all peoples will share in the abundance of God's creation, when all tears will be wiped away, when pain and mourning and death will be no more. No wonder the Church is weary.

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This is a wearying time for the church. Our Gospel reading offers welcome and genuine comfort to those of us who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Yet we must resist the temptation to turn Jesus into someone or something he is not. Jesus is not a commodity that we distribute to consumers. He is not a professor of political theory. He is not a modern therapist. Jesus is the One whom we meet in the Gospels: the personification of Wisdom, the Son of God, Israel's Messiah, the Crucified and Risen Lord, the founder of the Messianic Kingdom, the One who promises true rest, sabbath rest, foretold in creation, made flesh and blood in his person, fulfilled in the Messianic banquet.

It is his yoke that is easy. It is his burden that is light. It is in him that we will find rest for our weary souls. Thanks be to God. Amen.