May 16, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I had an interesting text exchange with my siblings the other day, all of whom live in rural Midwest settings. Needless to say, we have somewhat different perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic responses to date. The question of whether or not the response has been overblown seems to fall along predictable lines of political allegiances and proximity to actual infection hot spots. It’s admittedly kind of hard to see an imminent COVID-19 threat when there are few if any cases in your vicinity.

Generally speaking, places near major international airports have been the first and most seriously afflicted areas to date. Any pandemic novel or movie even remotely informed by medical science depicts just this scenario. And likewise, once the disease accelerates, the first appropriate public health response is to interrupt disease transmission chains by quarantine. In our case, the option of doing so with the precision of a scalpel vanished sometime in February, and the only resort left was the crude club of shutting down major swaths of our society in order to slow the spread and prevent our healthcare systems from being inundated.

Yet, even though effective in blunting the course of the disease’s progression, the resulting pain and loss have been enormous, with massive unemployment, collateral mental health issues, and a pervasive uncertainty about what comes next. We all want this to be over, but the critical questions are: what do we mean by “over,” and who gets to decide? We are liable to disagree in our responses to these questions.

A recent *New York Times* article examined past pandemics that have afflicted human societies throughout the ages. [[1]](#footnote-1) The article’s conclusion was that there are two types of endings to any pandemic; the first is the medical, when infection and death rates decline. The White House Coronavirus Task Force has identified just such criteria for re-opening America. Yet, despite the fact that most areas do not actually meet these criteria, re-opening is now happening at various rates virtually everywhere in the country.

That’s where the second ending – the social one – comes in. A recent White House press conference, where un-masked political leaders did all the talking, and masked public health officials stood silently in the background, vividly illustrated that the “end” of the COVID-19 pandemic is now being determined more by sociopolitical processes than by scientific advice. [[2]](#footnote-2)

So, who is right and who is wrong? Are the scientists wrong to remind us about how very fragile our hard-won gains are? Are political leaders and protesters wrong for reminding us that an epidemic of fear and despair can be every bit as deadly as a viral infection? What should be clear at this point is that straddling the gulf between the medical and social ends to any pandemic is a very, very messy process. But while differences of opinion on how to proceed are inevitable, obsessing over who is “right” and who is “wrong” locks us into a false dichotomy. What if our choice is not “either/or,” but “both/and?”

What I would like to suggest is that not only are differences inevitable, they are *necessary* and beneficial to finding the best solutions. As General George S. Patton once said: *“If everyone is thinking alike, then somebody isn’t thinking.”* But there is a huge difference between healthy, productive disagreements and heated arguments which tend to be the very opposite of productive and healthy. Just as shouting more loudly in English will not make a non-English speaker understand you better, neither will animosity toward others change minds or hearts. So how *do* we disagree without becoming disagreeable?

This is where we might well be guided by Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and Goats. [[3]](#footnote-3) While Jesus doesn’t exactly spell it out, he seems to be contrasting the mildness, simplicity, usefulness and patience of the sheep with the naturally quarrelsome, smelly and rather randy traits of the goats. And no matter how you read it, it doesn’t work out well for the goats. So, has Jesus got a grudge against goats? Of course not. This is not a story about the “good” sheep and “bad” goats. In fact, it isn’t about the barnyard at all. Rather, the parable is about people and how the choices of our hearts here and now will ultimately be judged. And where our treasure is, there also will our hearts be. [[4]](#footnote-4)

The French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre once said that hell is other people. Because of our shared biases and tendencies toward self-centered impulses, it can at times seem like he was right. What our parable suggests is that, as much as anything else, hell is a disposition of the soul where God is absent. Put another way, when we are unable to love, we willingly choose to imprison ourselves in hell. [[5]](#footnote-5) This applies most *especially* to our failure to love those with whom we may differ. [[6]](#footnote-6) It’s hard to be loving while loudly trumpeting the superiority of one’s own views or positions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has very rapidly humbled our conventional ideas about what is important and enduring. The loss of life and livelihood is lamentable and tragic. But the greater tragedy would be for us not to seize the new life that this shadow of death portends. That seems to be what happened in an earlier pandemic.

Until COVID-19, many Americans had never even heard about the 1918 Influenza Pandemic which, over a period of nearly three years, ravaged civilization on a scale that had not been seen since the Black Death in the Middle Ages. This flu changed America and the world forever. Yet, despite the slaughter, there are almost no memorials to it, and the first major account of the flu wasn’t even written until 1976. [[7]](#footnote-7)

At the tail-end of WW 1, triumphalism was the mood of the day. While dying on a field in Flanders reflected well on one’s family, turning blue and dying in a field-hospital bed was difficult for many loved ones to swallow. There appears to have been a mass decision to forget, and it has been suggested that this willful mass amnesia helps explain why COVID-19 caught us all so flat-footed. [[8]](#footnote-8)

What this suggests to me is that our “re-opening of America” should be about more than simply resuming commerce, making a living, politics as usual, or even just getting back to church. It is about *remembering* what is truly of enduring value. *Forbes* magazine reported a recent poll suggesting that about two thirds of Americans agrees with this, and sees the coronavirus as a message from God to get our act together. [[9]](#footnote-9) I would agree with this even if not necessarily in the (punitive) sense that some take it. So, if God is speaking to us, are we truly *listening* or just hearing what we want to hear?

Our parable discloses that *who* we listen to is reflected in *how* we relate to others. Christ is himself the origin and example of how we are to regard one another, and the parable he shared offers a grace-filled vision for how to live together in the light of God’s loving Kingdom right now. He reminded us that the only distinction that matters between people is not whether they are capitalists or communists, conservatives or liberals, church-goers or not, Catholics, Protestants, Jews or “Nones,” but whether or not they are capable of loving others as he loved us. [[10]](#footnote-10), [[11]](#footnote-11)

This has implications for how we emerge from this calamity. Maybe re-opening America should include re-opening ourselves to each other, and embracing our shared vulnerability. Perhaps we should proclaim the depth of our responsibilities to each other as loudly as we do our individual convictions and prerogatives. To use another sheep metaphor, the Good Shepherd tells us that if we are truly his sheep, we will hear his voice and respond to none other. [[12]](#footnote-12)

Grace and Peace,

Dr. Bob

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/health/coronavirus-plague-pandemic-history.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/coronavirus-outbreak/all> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 25:31-46 (NIV) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 6:21 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 1 John 3:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36; contrary to some opinion, Jesus’ ethic of love for enemies is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Alfred Crosby, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/business/1918-flu-memorials>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2020/05/15/two-thirds-o> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Frederick Buechner in *“The Faces of Jesus.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Galatians 3:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John 10:1-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)