

WE'VE GOT THIS!
SIGNS OF LIFE: WHY CHURCH MATTERS
COMMUNITY
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT – MARCH 29, 2020
BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN
CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

[Intro at beginning of the service:

To bring you up to date, the staff and I are in day 10 of our self-isolation from being exposed directly to the COVID-19 virus.

I was tested on March 21st.

When we planned worship for this week, I was pretty sure I'd test negative, but I was super sure I'd have the results by the end of the week, and we could have a service with both priest and deacon, a lector, and so on. But, nope, no test results. I'm not complaining!

Labs are already overwhelmed nationally, and so are hospitals in many states.

The staff's need to be under house arrest is not, comparatively, a big deal.

But that's why I'm here alone today . . . just in case.

The good news is that our quarantines end Thursday.

We hope to have a Palm Sunday offering with more folks leading worship, though we continue to ask you to attend only online.

because, through at least April 15th,

we need to comply with the Bishop's directive

that we follow the CDC's social distancing rule

of no more than 10 people in a room, keeping 6 feet apart.]

SERMON

I'll say one thing for this Great Weirdness we've been going through:

it has sparked some pretty funny jokes and a lot of creativity. My favorite jokes so far:

- A picture of a big table piled high with all different kinds of packages of TP.

The caption: *Coming this summer to a garage sale near you.*

- There's going to be a baby boom in 9 months.

The babies will be known as C-19 babies,
and the top names will be Scott and Charmin.

- After years of wanting to give my house a really thorough cleaning, but just not having the time, I've discovered that time wasn't the problem.

In terms of creativity, people – including some here at Good Shepherd – are learning about how to make washable face masks

to send to medical workers; not ideal, but slap dang better than nothing.

Of course, we're discovering all kinds of ways to stay connected without being in the same room.

A LOT of those involve new ways to meet over the internet.

Our reading from Hebrews today is a letter –

one of humanity's first ways to stay connected remotely –

that tells us in Chapter 10 to *consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds.*

Don't stop meeting together with other believers . . .

encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.

In Chapter 12 of that same letter, the writer says:

we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. [Hebrews 12:1]

How did an author writing 2,000 years ago know about the internet cloud we'd be meeting in today?

God is awesome.

One creative idea that several people sent to me came from Italy, where a priest asked his folks to send him their photos, which he printed and taped on the pews so he could see their faces as he celebrated Mass. Now, I didn't do that, in part because I've been away from the office, but mostly because I don't need the photos. I KNOW where each of you sit.

I can see your faces with the eyes of my heart, where you are all present every moment of the day.

So here we are, alone yet together in the cloud.

Even if I weren't under quarantine, not many could be here with me because churches, the government says, are not "essential businesses."

At first, I felt very dismissed and almost offended by that, until I remembered the meme I personally put up on our FB page this week:

*With church doors shutting across America,
it is time for us to show that church
has never been about the building.*

NAILED IT! As much as I miss seeing you,
WE ARE STILL CHURCH!

We are absolutely essential
to the wholeness, health and holiness
of the world.

Our buildings are wonderful, beautiful,
and very convenient,
but they are not essential to being church,
to bearing fruit.

The fruit we are to bear is to love each other as
Jesus loves us.

Our reading from 2 Esdras (which is in the Apocrypha)¹
describes this fruit of love:

*Defend the widow's rights. Judge in favor of the
fatherless.*

*Provide for those who are in need. Protect the
orphan. Clothe the naked.*

Care for the broken and the weak. Don't mock the lame, protect them instead.

Help the blind to see a vision of [God's] glory.

Gather the old and the young within your walls. Watch over your infants.

*Let your servants and employees rejoice,
and your whole community will have good morale.*

Isn't that exactly what the Church should be doing during a pandemic?

Doing whatever we need to do to bring good morale to the whole community?

Yes. And do you know what? The Church has done it in the past.

The Church already knows how to bear fruit by loving this way during a plague.

If fact, it may be WHY the church is around today.



¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2_Esdras

I've told you all this before, but I think bears repeating.

In 1997, Dr. Rodney Stark, a sociologist, wrote a book called
*The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement
 Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries.*²

The book describes how a movement that began with about 150 followers
 became the dominant religion in the West within 400 years.

In terms of human history, this is lightning speed.

This growth was in the Roman Empire, which was utterly hostile to the faith.
 Stark said that the reason Christianity grew in the ancient Roman Empire
 was because of the way that Christians treated people who were NOT Christians
 in a world rampant with plagues, starvation, war and abuse. Sound familiar?

In those days, you had to fight the odds to just to survive to adulthood.

Christians, Stark discovered, began to change those odds.

First, Christians took care of sick people.

As frequent plagues ripped through cities, Christians risked their lives
 to provide basic nursing care for not only their families but strangers.

When these folks recovered, they asked their caretakers, "Why did you do that?"

The Christians said, "Let me tell you about my Lord Jesus,
 and how he commanded us to bear fruit by loving our neighbors
 the same way he loved us. Doing this has brought joy and peace to our lives."

In THIS plague today, because of science, the emphasis is not only on treatment,
 but PREVENTION. The best way to survive a plague is not to get sick.

It takes all of us together stop the disease from spreading to those who are most vulnerable.

A letter to the editor in the Tampa Bay Times this week was a prime example
 of the conflict between the ME of our society, and the WE of Christianity.

The writer said, that as a 76-year-old retiree, he was OK with keeping all the businesses open as usual
 because he wanted his kids and grandkids to have the good life.

He concluded, *I realize this puts my life at greater risk due to my age
 [but] I am willing to accept it as it is a benefit to the whole. It is the American way.*³

He isn't sacrificing only himself, though. He is evidently willing to sacrifice people like MY mom and dad,
 and so many in this beloved parish, on the altar of commerce.

Is the "American way" to endanger others for the sake of money?

I never thought so, and it's certainly not the Christian way.

The love of Christ teaches us to do what is necessary to care for others,
 which means social distancing and staying home
 so the virus doesn't spread to those who are so very vulnerable.

The second reason Christianity grew, according to Dr. Stark,
 was because it was common practice in ancient times for people hoard food for themselves.

But Christians shared their food with others

so that maybe no one had a lot, but everyone had some.

This was revolutionary at the time. I guess it still is!

When people asked, "Why did you share with me?"

The Christians said, "Let me tell you about my Lord Jesus,
 and how he commanded us to bear fruit by loving our neighbors
 the same way he loved us. Doing this has brought joy and peace to our lives."

² Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997.

³ "The cure vs. the disease," Tampa Bay Times p. 14A, Wednesday, March 25, 2020

The third change Christians made was how they used governmental authority:

Christian soldiers, for example, maintained peace and order
by helping civilians instead of coercing and bullying them.

When asked why they respected the dignity of others,

Christians soldiers said, "Let me tell you about my Lord Jesus,
and how he commanded us to bear fruit by loving our neighbors
the same way he loved us. Doing this has brought joy and peace to our lives."

Fourth, says Dr. Stark, in ancient days, social Darwinism was the rule;
those who were broken and weak were useless and deserved
whatever suffering they had to endure, even unto death.

But Christians weren't about survival of the fittest, but caring:

caring for widows, orphans, the poor, the weak, the lame, the blind,
and even slaves; in so doing these nobodies of society saw the glory of God.

When a Christian was asked WHY they cared for nobodies,

the Christians said, "Let me tell you about my Lord Jesus,
and how he commanded us to bear fruit by loving our neighbors
the same way he loved us. Doing this has brought joy and peace to our lives."

The Christians who did these four things were mocked by society,
and for many centuries were imprisoned, tortured and killed for their faith.

Even so, the promise of a life of joy and peace

captured the hearts and spirits of thousands upon thousands,
and the Church grew exponentially for nearly 400 years WITHOUT BUILDINGS.

Clearly, we are living a world very similar to that of the earliest Christians:

The thing is, those of us who follow Christ can say, WE'VE GOT THIS!

It's not easy, but it's clear: we are to bear fruit by loving each other as Christ loves us.

Living and loving this way is essential

because it brings wholeness, health and holiness to the world,
which is God's plan for all of humanity.

The Church is called and equipped to do what it has done before in times of trouble:
live and love so that the WHOLE community will have good morale.

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

Let us pray... Almighty Triune God, we thank you for the gift of community, by which we share life's journey and grow together. May we follow your example of mutual self-giving and love to bless each other with an ever-widening embrace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who dances with you and the Holy Spirit, one God in Trinity of persons now and forever.

2 ESDRAS 2:10A, 20-22, ,

The Lord said this to Ezra: Announce to my people that I have prepared a feast for them, and I will give them the kingdom of Jerusalem, which I was about to give to Israel. Defend the widow's rights. Judge in favor of the fatherless. Provide for those who are in need. Protect the orphan. Clothe the naked. Care for the broken and the weak. Don't mock the lame, but protect them instead. Help the blind to see a vision of my glory. Gather the old and the young within your walls. Watch over your infants. Let your servants and employees rejoice, and your whole community will have good morale.

PSALM 133

Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when brethren live together in unity!

It is like fine oil upon the head that runs down upon the beard,
Upon the beard of Aaron, and runs down upon the collar of his robe.

It is like the dew of Hermon that falls upon the hills of Zion.

For there the LORD has ordained the blessing: life for evermore.

HEBREWS 10:19-25

Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus' blood, through a new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain, which is his body, and we have a great high priest over God's house.

Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water.

Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable.

And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.

JOHN 15-14, 16-18

[Jesus said,] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

"As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I don't call you servants any longer, because servants don't know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You didn't choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. I give you these commandments so that you can love each other.