

Sermon: Science, Faith, Freedom and COVID-19

A couple of years ago, when the Deacons filled in at the pulpit while awaiting an interim minister, I gave a couple of sermons in which I discussed my spiritual journey. It involved wrestling with doubt along the way, and coming to terms with not having all the answers.

Through all of that time, that doubt never reached the point of thinking that faith and science are incompatible. I never felt I had to choose between God and the findings of science, between faith and reason.

Anticipating the possibility that I might be giving another sermon at some point, I thought I would explore that theme. I began writing down some ideas on the subject and I would like to share them with you...

Some other time!

Since the COVID-19 pandemic descended on us, there is another matter, closely related, that has been on my mind. Early on, there was clearly a segment of the population, in both the U.S. and elsewhere, that just wouldn't take the danger of this virus seriously. They resisted either mandates or guidelines put in place to prevent the spread of the disease. And when vaccines became available, they declared they would not take them. There was clearly a good deal of anti-science attitude present here, and often on the part of religious people. "Jesus is my vaccine!" declared one protestor's sign. There's that faith-versus-reason divide we've seen so often.

More often than not, though, these resisters express their views not in terms of religion but as a matter of personal freedom. "No one's going to tell ME what to do!" The face covering, the most recommended safety measure of the whole pandemic, has become a symbol of oppression. Refusing to wear a mask has become a political statement. "Mandates are un-American!" Oh, really? I read recently that General George Washington mandated that American troops get inoculated

against smallpox, as British troops already were, so we wouldn't be at a disadvantage. There's a mandate that actually helped win our freedom!

At the start, we weren't yet sure that face masks would prevent one from catching the virus, but the health experts WERE sure that it would help prevent the spread, since this insidious virus has a long incubation period, or can be present without displaying symptoms. So one might be carrying the virus and spreading it without knowing it. Wearing a mask thus had an altruistic aspect from the start—concern to not be a part of the problem, thinking of others in your community. And such considerations just didn't seem to occur to the resisters. “It's a bother for me, so I'm not gonna do it!” They maintained this attitude, even when it was clear that the mask would indeed help them avoid the virus.

It really frustrated me, seeing this attitude. I'm not a guy who goes out looking for a fight, and I don't like contentious arguments, but that doesn't stop me from producing arguments in my head, wanting to confront these people over the seriousness of the situation, to convince them of the need to think of other people beyond themselves. So I have a little dialogue that reflects my thinking on this matter. If appeals to either science or to “the common good” won't get through to them, I wonder if a little theology might break through here. Maybe I would start like this.

“I know you identify yourself as a Christian. So how about asking that old familiar question: What would Jesus do? If He were among us today, going through this pandemic with us, what would Jesus do?”

My hearer might brush that aside as irrelevant, not applicable to this situation. “Jesus is God! He wouldn't catch this virus, much less spread it!”

“Now wait a minute,” I’d say. “If you’re going to rely on Trinitarian doctrine, maybe you’d better recall the details. Not only does the Creed say Jesus was divine, it also says he was fully human. And you *know* that’s true. Jesus died! He was human! And being truly human, he was surely capable of contracting a virus.”

“Yeah, well, he wouldn’t get sick! Jesus healed people, and could certainly heal himself if necessary.”

“OK. Maybe he wouldn’t have come down with the disease—there are plenty who don’t and are asymptomatic. But the virus doesn’t care! It will use a human host to get around and infect those who are most susceptible. So I think Jesus would wear the mask, so as not to contribute to the spread of the virus.”

“I don’t buy it! Like I said, he’d heal anyone he met with the disease.”

“Well,,. Don’t you think prevention would be better than treatment after the fact? He’d be quite busy trying to heal everyone who has come down with COVID during this pandemic! Better not to let it spread, and I think Jesus would be part of the effort to prevent spread, as well as set an example for us.”

There’s that look on his face, as my hearer shakes his head, rolls his eyes...

“Look, if you don’t want to speculate on what Jesus would have done, at least consider what he actually did. Consider what St. Paul wrote in his epistle to the Philippians. Jesus humbled himself for our sake, took on

all the burdens of living a human life for our sake. According to the usual understanding of Jesus, he was in some manner pre-existent, dwelling in Heaven in the presence of God the Father, in a state of perfection, immortality—and can you imagine a freedom greater than that? And he gave it up! Jesus gave up this freedom to come and dwell among us, for the benefit of humanity. It was only temporary, he would have that freedom again, but he laid it aside to do his work on Earth, and save us from our sorry state, help bring us back to God and bring something of the Kingdom of Heaven here to us on Earth. Can't we follow his example, and surrender just a bit of freedom for a little while, for the sake of our neighbors?"

Well, folks, what do you think? Would such a theological argument make any headway with someone who says his freedom to dispense with the mask, or with getting a vaccine, is more important than any consideration of public health? I must admit I have my doubts! Some folks will stick to their guns and not be swayed, even by a theological argument that seems to align with their professed faith.

My argument might not even appeal to some of you, knowing that this congregation does not require adherence to the Trinitarian creeds. But even if you don't take Paul's teaching literally, I think it's still an effective metaphor—a parable if you will, working to remind us to think beyond our private interests and consider those around us. I kept this in mind as the pandemic ran its course, and can do so again if a new spike in cases calls for renewed caution. When we put on the face mask, we are in some small way practicing what Thomas a Kempis called the "imitation of Christ," following the example of Jesus: Giving up a little freedom for a little while, for the sake of our neighbors, to be a part of the solution to a serious problem. Loving our neighbor as ourselves. It's the least we could do. Amen.