

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“Live Peaceably Wit All”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, August 23, 2020

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’

But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you”, and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you.” ’ God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”’: This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, as we open ourselves to the ministry of your word this day, I pray that you would allow that word and your spirit to form our minds and our hearts and our souls, to shape us into the people of God, to let us be grounded in your goodness and your grace, to trust that that goodness and grace rises within us from deep in our souls and that we can act out and speak forth your gospel-- your good news. We can speak it forth to our neighbors, our family. We can speak it forth to strangers. We can even speak it to ourselves, so bless your speaking. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, I pray. Amen.

So, I'm not quite sure if this is sermon or State of the Union. I think it might be a little bit of both. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he's laying out sort of one of the central tenets that he holds, which is that the world or the elemental spirits of the world are constantly trying to form us in the ways of fear and greed and lust into something other than the people of God. And that the counter to the elemental spirits of the world, which seek to form us is the gospel of Jesus Christ-- the gospel proclaimed, lived, put into action. And that if we trust that gospel and the grace that is given to each of us, we can be shaped into doing what our specific task in the body of Christ is to be. He lists some of them here: prophecy, ministry, teacher, exhorter, giver, leader, and compassionate ones, but surely there are other gifts that we embody.

But the tension is there. What will we listen to? What will we be formed into? As Jeremiah became aware when the word of the Lord came to him, the Lord said, "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So, I went down to the potter's house. There was a wheel he was working at. The vessel that he was making of clay spoiled in his hands, and he reworked it into another vessel that seemed good to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me, "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter's hands, so are you in my hands, O house of Israel." So, in a sense, each of us in our own way are like that clay being formed, as Paul worries, maybe by the fears and the greed and the lust and the anger that's out in the world, or we're being formed by the gospel. I ran across an article this morning out of the Washington Post online version that sort of talks about that power of being formed. In it, an expert on risk perception named Dale Griffin is quoted as saying, "Once people were glued to the news broadcasts about the virus and its risk. Now, when they think about COVID-19, most people have a reduced emotional reaction. They see it as less salient.

In a sense, what he's talking about is habituation, which is when all of us are viewing the landscape of risk, and if there's a risk that we've encountered, and it's now the 15th time that we've encountered that risk, it becomes sort of a habit for us to diminish our perception of threat. We become habituated to the fact that COVID-19 is out in the world, and we don't have that visceral, "Oh my goodness," kind of reaction to it. In a sense, our mind and our understanding about the virus is changed because we're allowing our emotional response to guide our understanding. At first, going to the store for groceries seemed almost unacceptable. I remember the first time I went to the store. I was terrified. Sanitized everything I could think about, and then kept the hand sanitizing wipe in my hand and walked all around the store continually just sort of wringing my hands in it. Now, when I go to the store, I don't really think about sanitizing my hands all the time because I've gone to the store hundreds of times, it feels like. Doesn't seem like there's much risk. I still wear my mask, I try to go at a time when there's not a lot of people there, but I don't have that same fear that I used to have. Another psychologist, Paul Slovic, of the University of Oregon says, "You have an experience. The experience is benign. It feels okay and comfortable. It's familiar. Then you do it again. And if you don't see anything immediately bad happening, your concerns get deconditioned." In a sense, we began to think that there is no threat. "The end result of all this desensitization is a kind of overriding heedlessness decoupled from evidence," the article says. "You see this in the anti-mask movements, beach gatherings, overflowed dancing parties, all the things that are going on at universities where students are possibly getting expelled because they're gathering to have a COVID party. All these things are predictable," the social scientists tell us. Because our emotional feedback says the threat is lessened, eventually we think, "Well, there can't really be a threat, so why bother." And we decouple, or disconnect, that sense of threat with the scientific evidence. Again, as Paul says, "We're allowing the world to form our understandings."

The article goes on and talks in-depth about how we shouldn't decouple our behavior from the evidence about the virus. We need to take the mandates to wear masks, to wash our hands, to social distance incredibly serious in spite of our own feelings about how maybe going to the grocery store is okay, or going out for coffee is okay, or eating outside in a restaurant is okay. The virus and its characteristics and how it's transmitted have not changed. Finally, the article concludes that one way that we can sort of reform our understanding about the risk and the appropriate behaviors that are attached to it is by what Daniel Kahneman, the 2002 Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics, suggests in his research on psychology and economic science. What he called for in his dissertation, or paper, was what's called slow thinking. Slow thinking is decision-making based on careful analysis of the evidence. You need to either do the slow thinking yourself, or trust experts who do the slow thinking, and understand the situation. Slow thinking minimizes our emotional impact, and it elevates the evidence-based realities that are still at play. So, what Paul says is that we are malleable in our understanding and in our way of being. We are impressionable. We are changeable. We are not fixed people who are predetermined to be, or act, or think, or analyze, in a certain way. We have the power to change.

One of the key lessons that I learned during my time at the pain management program in Chicago was that by doing different exercises and stresses, I could reprogram my mind, my brain, to make new neural connections to eliminate the fear response that is happening in my muscles, in my back, and in my legs, and allow them to relax simply by changing the behavior and reconditioning everything to a new reality. In a sense, it's habitation but in a positive outcome unlike what Paul is worried about, or what the conversation about COVID is all about. Paul goes on to say that we are in this together. That as members of the body of Christ, we are unified in our direction, in our purpose, but we're not all the same. So, we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually, we are members one of another. Again, he lists all the gifts for ministry and explains that some of us have prophecy, or ministry gifts, while others have gifts in giving or compassion. So not only are we changeable, but each of us comes at the situation of our understanding of the risk of COVID from a very different place. We look at it sort of in multi-tiered approach if you will or a multifaceted approach. And one of the ways to look at it, COVID, and understanding it and to understand our differences is not through the list that Paul gives but through another list which is called the enneagram. A lot of times when we think about a community and the variety and diversity of it, we think about external factors: age, race, nationality, maybe socioeconomic stuff, all things that we can quantify or observe-- again, empirical data. But the enneagram looks at what's considered to be our disposition or our primary role in the world and in the communities that we serve, and it lists nine different roles. So again, we might all come to a situation and be willing to understand it openly or address it, but we're going to come at it from nine different facets. And each of those facets is going to change how we analyze the situation and our conclusions.

The roles in the enneagram-- the primary roles that we have are-- number one is called the reformer or the perfectionist. Number two is the helper. Number three is the achiever. Number four is the individualist. Number five is the investigator. Number six is the loyalist. Seven is the enthusiast. Eight is the challenger, and nine is the peacemaker. Each of these personality types or characteristics has a vice and a virtue. For example, the helper's vice is pride. They feel good about helping, but their virtue is humility. They serve without any need for recognition. The five which-- I'm a five. My vice is avarice. My virtue is nonattachment, being able to be in a situation and to not really have an overly strong personal emotional reaction. I can just be there, and what's happening around me doesn't affect my internal equilibrium. The peacemaker, number nine on the enneagram, their vice is sloth. They get burned out. They get disengaged because they're just tired and whatever they're doing doesn't seem to make a difference. Their virtue is sort of the opposite of that. It's action. They get involved. They keep at it. They keep going.

So when Paul says that we are all members of one body and each brings our gift, what we always need to remember when we're working together in any situation, where it's more than just ourselves, is that the person who's working with us is most likely not our dominant personality type. There's someone that's different from us, so they're going to look at things differently. They're going to articulate things differently. They're going to understand things differently, and they are going to be sort of

passionate about a different outcome than you or I might be. This can sound like an insurmountable challenge of becoming one body where everyone is working together, but when you think about it, what it really is, is an incredibly powerful articulation of the beauty and the necessity if you will of community. If you have a large enough community addressing a situation, you will have all nine personality types. In a sense, if everyone's breathing and at peace, you will have all the virtues of those nine types coming together to formulate an answer to whatever question you are trying to address. The virtues are serenity, humility, truthfulness, emotional balance, non-attachment, courage, sobriety, innocence, and action. Imagine having a group coming together with all of those virtues at work as they try to solve a situation. Now the reason that I'm bringing these up, the Enneagram and the fact that we're malleable and all of that is because of what Paul is talking about in Romans seems to fit beautifully with what we're trying to figure out as a church body, which is when do we reopen safely. All of the people that are working on that question have different understandings of what it means to reopen safely. All of us have been habituated. The acute threat of COVID has diminished into the background and now we feel much more comfortable taking risks that maybe we shouldn't take. And what's important to remember in all of this, and it's kind of missed if we move through the text too fast, is that Paul asks us at the beginning of the text to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. This is an oxymoron. Sacrifices in the history of the Old Testament, in Paul's understanding, in the understanding of the Hebrew people is of animals that are brought forth before the Lord, placed upon the altar, and then cut in half. Sacrifices are never living. They are dead offerings. But Paul talks about a living sacrifice, so he's, in a sense, with that language, trying to change our understanding. He's trying to transform if you will our way of looking at what it means to offer God a sacrifice. And we're to do so as living entities, full of life, joy, happiness, the Gospel. Also filled with some worries, some concerns, some fears. But all of us are working towards becoming or being that living sacrifice, that oxymoron, as we transform our understandings and move to what Slovak, the Nobel laureate calls slow thinking in our assessment of what's going on.

The reason I bring this up is because, as I said, we're working towards figuring out when to reopen. The reopening task force is at work. The session is asking questions, and more and more people that we're hearing from are kind of ready to reopen. They want to come back to church as we all do. And as we go through our lives, and it feels like the risk is going down, we need to do that slow thinking together. So, I'm going to offer a couple examples of what slow thinking is informing us right now. The first is from Andrew Genachowski who's a doctor at the Children's Hospital at Wash U, and he specializes in infectious disease. He put out a list of risky behaviors in the midst of COVID-19. When people are wearing masks and social distancing, and when people are not wearing masks and social distancing. He says that the riskiest activities without a mask or social distancing include going to a movie, attending a church service with more than 100 people, or being at a concert or a sports event. That's without masks. With a mask, religious services with 100 worshippers is still one of the riskiest activities. Out of a scale of 0 to 10, or 1 to 10, 1 being the safest, religious services with 100 worshippers with a mask and with social distancing, rates as a 7. It is still a very risky proposition. He concludes the article where he presents this data with this quote, "Until an effective vaccine is developed, one of our best weapons against COVID-19 are wearing masks and social distancing. This is the new norm, and will have to be part of our daily habits for the rest of 2020 and probably well into 2021. We're going to have to do the things that we've learned to do for longer than I think any of us really want to." There's also a website that provides risk assessment for gatherings of various numbers of people, and it's real-time. So I went on that website this morning. It's called The COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Tool, and right now to do a gathering in St. Louis County of 100 people, out of 1 to 100, where 1 is the safest, 100 is the riskiest, to do an event with 100 people scores a 96. 75 people is 89, and 50 people is 81. So to gather with 50 people, which the county will allow you to do now, the risk is 81% out of 100.

If we're doing the slow work that-- the slow thinking that we're invited to do we may ask ourselves, "Is it safe for 50 people to gather if the risk is 81%?" The tricky part is figuring out at what percent of risk is something safe. And, we don't know. The reopening task force doesn't know, the session doesn't know. Even the experts aren't quite sure. I reached out to several of the physicians in the congregation and asked them what they thought. And one of them, who's on the Kirkwood school district consultation team and also works with area sports for high schoolers and college students trying to figure out when it will be safe for sports to re-emerge, responded with this. He said, "With whatever numbers you choose to go with setting the threshold

is perhaps the most difficult. In the groups I'm working with, this has been problematic enough that we've chosen to look at numbers but not use them as an absolute guide. There's also always consideration things not in the numbers like what's happening in other churches that are nearby or other settings that are similar to yours?" In a sense what we're trying to do as we get ready to reopen at some point in the future, and working with all the numbers, and all of the intuitive dimensions of our group. All the different gifts and personality types that are coming to the question. What we're trying to do is bring together the empirical data, and the intuition and judgment of a dedicated group of people to determine what is the best and safest course going forward.

This past week the session voted that the safest course right now, at least and through until October 25th, is to remain engaged in worship virtually and to have the church building close for all church-based activities. It was a hard decision. And in the session group and in the reopening task force and in other conversations that I've had with people, I've come to appreciate the real sense of loss that we share by not being able to worship together. To not be able to sing, to pray, to laugh, to hug together. But what I can promise you is that we're working towards having us be safe. We're working towards having us be that living sacrifice, with the emphasis more on the living than on the sacrifice. And I can promise you that all of us are bringing our best efforts to that. So with about 35 people looking at the question for us as a congregation, all of them offering their best judgments, I'm sure that in the near future in the weeks ahead we'll have a clearer sense of what the reopening requirements look like and we'll be able to share those. Until then, we thank you for your ongoing participation with us virtually. The giving that you continue to offer to the church so that the ministries can flourish. And we thank you for the encouragements that you send by email or phone call or note card. It's really appreciated. So, my prayer is that God continues to bless us in this time of chosen separation and that God will especially bless us when we come back together. Amen.