

“First Responder”: A short sermon utilizing the ransom image. It was given March 22, 2020, the second week of online services during the COVID-19 pandemic, by Phil Schmidt, pastor of Tabor Mennonite Church, Newton KS

Scripture Reading: Matthew 20:17-28 (NIV):

Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”

Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

“What is it you want?” he asked.

She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The Word of God for the People of God
Thanks Be to God!

Sermon: “First Responder”

Throughout the season of Lent, we are reflecting on different images of the cross, including “service,” “reconciliation,” and “sacrifice.” Each different image offers a unique way for us to understand the meaning and significance of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

Today we are considering the image of “ransom,” which in our language today reminds us of a ransom payment after someone is kidnapped in order to set them free. Somewhat similarly, in Jesus’ day, ransom was a word about how slaves were set free, often using a sum of money, but not necessarily using money. This fits with the context of the scripture passage we just heard, in which Jesus defined true greatness as taking the position of a servant or slave instead of exercising authority over others, “just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In other words, Jesus took the position of a slave and gave his life to free others caught in slavery. One of the Biblical echoes of Jesus’ language is the story of the Exodus, where God ransomed, or freed, God’s people from slavery in Egypt.

The story of “ransom” as it relates to Jesus’ death on the cross could be told like this: From the beginning of time, all of humanity has been infected with the sin virus, which means that they have broken God’s laws. No one is immune. The virus cannot be stopped.

God, who is holy and righteous, is angry at humanity and cannot look upon humanity infected with sin, so God’s back is turned away. Thus, humanity is held captive by the virus of sin, and a ransom must be paid to appease God and thus allow God to forgive and free the people.

Jesus is sent, therefore, to pay the ransom price by dying, taking upon himself the sin of the world, and covering everyone who professes faith in him with his blood. In doing so, God can then turn and look at everyone who has declared loyalty to Jesus, offering forgiveness and freedom.

That’s one way the story could be told. And there’s some power in this way of telling the story, but the thing that bothers me about it is the perspective that God is an angry God who cannot look upon humanity caught in the virus of sin. While the Bible does depict a God who is Holy and set apart, there are also plenty of passages that speak to a God who is present in the midst of people’s pain and struggles.

What if we told the story of ransom in this way?

Humanity is infected with the virus of sin, which means that everyone struggles with broken relationships with God, with other people, with themselves, and with creation. The virus of sin has caused chaos and brokenness to a global pandemic level.

God is a God who created all people with a divine spark, who longs for all people to find healing and restoration of relationships with God, others, themselves, and creation. Thus, in response to the pandemic of sin and brokenness, God intervenes in the most drastic and dramatic way, not by sending someone else to do the dirty work, but by coming in the flesh. God puts on skin and fully enters the world full of sin. Jesus is God in the flesh. Jesus is like a first responder who is at the front lines of a medical emergency. Through his life, Jesus calls followers to build up immunity to the sin virus by placing their allegiance not in the kingdoms of this world, which perpetuate the virus of sin, but to place their allegiance in the kingdom of God. Jesus calls followers to join the Reign of God, which is already breaking into the world, and he also trains his disciples to do his work, acting themselves as first responders amidst the global medical crisis.

But the virus is still unstoppable. It cannot be contained. It continues to spread through tactics of fear, violence, and oppression. The virus of sin holds all of humanity captive. The world cannot move forward without a vaccine. Jesus knows that the only way to successfully create and administer a vaccine to sin is by allowing himself to experience the full weight of the virus. It's a difficult cup to drink, but Jesus, God in the flesh, is courageous enough to do so. Jesus, who has lived his life dedicated to serving others on the front lines of a global pandemic, chooses the way of the cross. In doing so, Jesus faces the full wrath of the sin virus: betrayal, broken relationships, isolation, shame, mental and physical abuse, and more. As Jesus hangs on the cross, he receives the full weight of sin. In doing so, Jesus pays the ultimate price. Then Jesus dies and the world waits in darkness.

But it wasn't just Jesus who died on the cross. When Jesus died, he put the virus of sin to death as well. Through Jesus' death, the sin virus lost its power. Through Jesus' death, he successfully created a vaccine. And when God raised Jesus to new life, the virus of sin remained in the grave and the vaccine could begin to spread, offering healing and restoration to all people.

But the world was still infected. Relationships were still broken. The virus of sin still seemed to spread as quickly as ever, throughout generations and geography, causing damage and destruction all along the way.

So if sin is still rampant and humanity is still enslaved, what actually changed through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection? Everything changed.

Jesus revealed a God who is present, not distant. Jesus revealed a God willing to pay the ultimate price in order for people to find freedom, healing, and hope.

When God raised Jesus from the dead, God revealed a spark of hope for all of humanity. Death is not the end of the story. The virus of sin is strong, but God is stronger. In raising Jesus from the dead, God provided the vaccine for the sin virus, the vaccine of hope. Hope amidst fear. Hope amidst loss. Hope amidst darkness. It's that spark of hope that transformed the world.

You see, in Jesus' life, he revealed the true way to fight the sin virus, not through striving for more - more wealth, more power, more status - at the expense of others. That's what the sin virus leads to. Jesus revealed the true way to fight the sin virus through loving service to all with a heart full of hope. Hope that no matter how deep the darkness, God's light still shines. Hope that new life is beyond the grave.

Before Jesus died, he sent his disciples out to proclaim and embody the good news of the kingdom of God. After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples, saying "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18b-20, NIV).

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, we are living in anxious and uncertain times. People all around the world are impacted by the spread of the novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19. More and more cases are being reported. Fear and anxiety are rising. In order to slow the spread of the virus, physical distancing is becoming the norm. Many events, including schools, are cancelled and the future seems more uncertain than ever. I confess that throughout this past week, I have felt flooded on several occasions. The input of media and resources, and all the loss of plans have felt overwhelming.

And yet, this scripture, this image of the cross, this way of telling the story, gives me hope. Because I know that the story of the Gospels is not a story of a distant, untouchable God, but rather a loving and present God. A God who looked upon a broken humanity and instead of turning away, put on flesh and came into the world to look at us, to be present with us, and to provide the vaccine of hope.

So as we journey into the unknown of the coronavirus pandemic, may we put our hope in a God who is with us and for us. As you practice appropriate physical distancing in this time, may we remember that God created each of us with the

divine spark. So when you look at others, whether it is in person (at a distance of 6+ feet) or through a screen, remember that they are made in the image of God. Remember that each of us have our own challenges and struggles. So look upon each other with love and compassion and grace. And in doing so, look for ways to practice deeper connection, restoring right relationships with God, others, ourselves, and creation. And as we follow Jesus together, may we creatively brainstorm ways of practicing loving service to those who are most vulnerable in our communities and in our world. Because of the price that Jesus paid on the cross to offer freedom and hope to all people, we know that the virus of sin does not have ultimate power, and neither does the coronavirus. We can live as people of hope. We can use this time of panic and pandemic to deepen our faith and put our faith into practice. Jesus has sent us out to spread the vaccine of hope.

May it be so. Amen.