

The Plague

1 John 3:11-24; John 10:11-18

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How about that swine flu? Pretty crazy stuff, eh? As Alice in Wonderland would say, “Curiouser and curiouser.” I’m usually hesitant to preach on news headlines. It’s not that I think they are irrelevant to faith, but the headlines are just so flashy. It’s easy to get caught up in something one week, and then the next week it’s all but forgotten. For instance, I had to really bite my tongue to keep from preaching on Susan Doyle last week. But maybe I shouldn’t restrain myself so much. Maybe we would all benefit from theological reflection on cheesy reality shows.

At any rate, I’m not restraining myself this week. Swine flu is actually very theological. Okay, not 2009 H1Ni specifically, but rather plagues in general. And it’s not just that the word “plague” sounds so biblical.” (Though nowadays we call it a pandemic – whatever that means.) I mean plague in the sense of a widespread illness that causes panic. Is 2009 H1Ni a plague? Not medically. But people’s reaction to it has been typical of their reaction to other new illnesses over the centuries. In fact, you could speak of plagues in the medical sense, but also in a social sense. Plagues temporarily change people’s behavior, and I don’t mean washing their hands more often. Rather, plagues trigger paranoia, and along with that a fear of foreigners, of strangers, of everyone who is different. In this sense, plagues are very theological because they have all too often unleashed religious violence. In the happy days of yore, plagues were always accompanied by outbursts of virulent anti-Semitism. Jews, but also gypsies or anyone perceived as foreign, were accused of poisoning village wells or otherwise deliberately spreading illness. At the first sign of plague, villages would round up local Jews or gypsies and brutally murder them in the village square, even right in front of the church.

We don’t do that anymore, but the tradition is still preserved in our ongoing fear of strangers, especially foreigners. It’s a “Mexican” flue after all. We should close the borders! Bar the town gates! Lock the doors! Close down schools, everyone stays at home, wear masks. Supposedly these measures are taken for health reasons, and while there may be some medical merit to them, they also trigger a social phenomenon of fear, paranoia and distrust, feelings that are all too often directed more at people than at any virus.

Let’s be clear that I’m not talking about the health issues here, but about that social phenomenon, because as I said, throughout history it has acquired a religious taint. How can this happen? How can a religion whose founder was murdered by people who believed they were doing God’s will become a religion that in the Middle Ages would murder a Jew in the church yard every Easter as a sort of vaccination against plague? How can that happen? And how can we keep that kind of mentality from creeping back into our brains. We might even say, keep it from contaminating and infecting us? Well, the answer has a lot to do with Jesus’ death.

Last week we talked about the resurrection, that there are many views and interpretations but no definitive answer about what happened. Rather, we must ponder what it means and how we are different because of it. This week I want to do the same with regard to Jesus’ death, and as we’ll see, the answers we come up with are very relevant when it comes to the matter of plagues.

Why did Jesus die? Christians often speak of Jesus’ death as being somehow necessary for our salvation. “He died on the cross for our sin,” it’s often said. But what does that mean? One answer, particularly popular these days, is that Jesus was

a substitutionary sacrifice. As wretched sinners we all deserve to die, but Jesus substituted himself as a sacrifice and got us off the hook. That tends to be the default view these days, so that we often assume it's the only way to understand Jesus' death, even if we don't fully understand how it's supposed to work. If you think about it deeply, you may even be a bit disturbed by it. After all, it makes God into a pretty nasty fellow, incapable of forgiveness, yet capable of murdering his own son. Seriously, it's kinda bloodthirsty.

But that is just one interpretation. There are many other ways to interpret Jesus' death, and I want to present another one. (Again, very Girardian for those of you who took my class.) And to get into it, let's talk about what it means to call Jesus "the Good Shepherd." We're very familiar with that image, beloved through the 23rd Psalm, expressed in much religious art. In fact, the earliest Christian art we have does not depict the cross, but rather shows Jesus as a shepherd. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, carrying a lamb in his arms. The metaphor seems like a really good match, yet even here there are difficulties. I mean, why does a shepherd keep sheep, anyway? At best it's to shave them bald and make sweaters out of them. At worst it's to slice them up into gyros and lamb kebabs. Not a very appealing image! IS that what we are? Just so much livestock?

But there are other meanings at work here. In Bible times, sheep were the ideal animals to offer as a sacrifice in the Temple. Sheep were sacrificed, that is religiously murdered, in order to cure people of the contagion of their sin. Get it? Unless sheep were killed in the name of God, then the plague of sin would spread and consume us all. This is why Jesus, in addition to being called the Good Shepherd is also called the Lamb. He was a sacrificial animal. According to some ancient thought, his perfect sacrifice meant that sheep no longer had to be sacrificed for our sins. So there's this identification of the shepherd with the sheep. Rather than being Jesus' livestock, Jesus is a fellow lamb to the slaughter, and his purpose is to redeem his flock.

But still, how does that work? Listen to what he says in the gospel of John. What defines the good shepherd is not that he owns the sheep but that he cares for them and loves them. Above all, he lays down his life for them. In fact, he says that five times in just this passage alone. If anyone knows what it's like to get snatched away by the wolf, it's Jesus.

But it does the flock no good if the shepherd gets eaten instead of them. The wolf will just come back and get them next, and now they will be unprotected. No, this is not substitutionary sacrifice, where Jesus takes our place in the jaws of the wolf. Rather, he lays down his life that he might take it up again. That's the resurrection, the indication that he's not just taking our place in the machine of sacrifice, but rather that he risks sacrifice in order to be what Bonhoeffer calls "a spoke in the wheel." He lays down his life in order to break the machine of sacrifice. The key here is not his death *per se*; it's his willingness to give his life. A subtle but vital distinction.

Come with me now over to the letter of John to explore more of what this means, especially what it means for us today. John says, "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another." Hear that again. "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another." Parenthetically he adds that whoever does not love abides in death. This is some pretty heavy stuff. And he's not talking about a mere sentiment, but about something really powerful, something life-changing, something world-altering. And here is the key: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us." There's that phrase again! It's important not that he died, but that he laid down his life, a life he would in fact take up again. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and here it comes! – we ought to lay down our lives for one another. That's crucial! That's the key! Here's how it all works: Jesus breaks the cycle of religiously motivated violence by laying down his life, offering himself up even unto death, so that we would do the same.

And all of our self-giving, all of us laying down our lives, being willing to take the risk – all of this will gum up the works of the sacrificial machine, of religiously motivated violence.

Remember how medieval Christians would kill a Jew as a plague vaccination. In essence they offered up a human being as a sacrifice to stave off the plague, and they believed they were justified in doing so because clearly Jews opposed God, so they were evil and had to be stopped. Imagine what would have happened, though, if a Christian villager had stood up and said, “No, no; kill me instead.” The crowd might have said, “Okay,” and killed this substitutionary sacrifice. Nothing would have changed. But if yet another Christian got up, and another, and another, each of them saying, “Kill me instead.” Then the mob might have begun to get a clue that what they were doing was wrong.

It really happened. Many times, but here’s a more recent yet little-known example. Nazi Germany. We all know how the Nazis saw Jews and many others, including gypsies, gays, and the mentally and physically handicapped, as a contagion or plague in a good Aryan society. They sought to kill all these people and prevent the spread of their so-called plague. So the Nazis spread their own contagion of violence throughout Europe in every country they conquered – except one. Denmark. Only about 75 Jews in all of Denmark were ever killed. What happened? When the Nazis issued an order that the next day all Jews must wear a gold star, effectively marking themselves as lambs for slaughter – that next day *all* Danes appeared wearing a gold star. They all marked themselves for sacrifice. They presented themselves as spokes in the wheel, as a wrench in the works. And rather than killing everybody, the Nazis ended up killing almost no one. True story. Don’t believe me? It really worked.

One more thing. In talking about the shepherd and the sheep, Jesus says that he has other sheep to bring into the fold. In other words, new people, strangers. Some Christians have seen it as their job to keep out impure elements because they might bring contagion. It’s yet another version of that plague mentality. But time and again in the gospels, Jesus stressed that that’s not our job. It’s not our job to separate wheat from weeds, sheep from goats, good fish from bad fish. Our job is to welcome everyone in Jesus’ name, especially strangers. In fact, I was surprised to learn in my research this week that the Old Testament commands us to love our neighbors in that famous passage, that phrasing occurs only once, while thirty-six times the Old Testament commands us to love the stranger. The word for that in Greek is *philoxenia*, which we translate as hospitality. *Philoxenia* is a mouthful, but there’s a related word that I bet you’ve heard before: *xenophobia*. Phobia means fear, *xenos* or *xenia* means foreigner, the stranger. *Xenophobia* versus *philoxenia*. Again we recall that one of the symptoms of plague is *xenophobia*, fear of strangers. Yet we as Christians are called to hospitality, *philoxenia*, love of strangers.

We know, says John, that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. And we know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

That, my friends, will cure what really ails you.