

May 13, 2020

### What Is God Trying To Teach Us?

A blessed Wednesday to my faith family,

On April 20, 2020, the day that we celebrated my wife's 61<sup>st</sup> birthday, Pat Robertson was broadcasting yet another episode of his long-running television show, "The 700 Club". During the segment of the show during which Mr. Robertson replies to viewer questions, he responded to this interrogatory concerning COVID-19: "How can God heal our land and forgive the sins when abortion and same-sex marriage are laws and many people are anti-Israel. Doesn't this prevent his healing and forgiveness?" Robertson told the viewer, "You are right. I think you put your finger on something very important. You know the Bible says — they turn from their wicked ways. We are not turning." It was a message not unlike the one Mr. Robertson shared in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy when he asserted that an angry God had allowed the terrorists to succeed in their deadly mission because the United States had become "a nation of abortion, homosexuality, secular schools and courts, and the American civil liberties union."

Some weeks ago, I received e-mail from a member of the congregation who had been in contact with a number of other Trinity folks. She said she was hearing this question or some variant thereof with some frequency; "Has God sent us a wake-up call with this pandemic? Are we experiencing His wrath for our evil ways?" I've heard similar thoughts expressed in a number of my recent conversations. "Pastor, what do you think God is trying to teach us with this Pandemic? God must be trying to teach us something!"

Before going any further, let me say very clearly that I do not believe that an angry God has sent this scourge upon us as punishment for our sins. And while we may all learn some important things as we deal with this experience, I do not believe that God has sent the killer virus to teach us some lesson, the specific content of which eludes us. Here is why I say that:

To agree with Mr. Robertson...You'd have to believe that God chooses certain "sins" like ACLU membership and homosexual marriage, specifically, to be worthy of punishment by death. You would have to do so knowing that Jesus never spoke a word about either ACLU membership or gay marriage, though he *did* mention the sins of greed, hubris, arrogance, calumny, unrighteousness, lack of compassion for the downtrodden and indifference to the plight of vulnerable people. The Bible *is* chock full of condemnations for those things. If God were ever to send a pandemic upon our nation, in response to societal ills, it seems more likely to me that God would have done so when we were

importing slaves, shackling them in ships, ripping them apart from their families and selling them to the highest bidder to be worked to death. Another better time for God to have “gotten” us for egregious systemic unrighteousness might have been during the time of Jim Crow oppression, lynchings and the murder of Freedom Riders.

To agree with this point of view that God is using the pandemic to “teach us a lesson”, I would have to believe that God would intentionally set loose an infectious scourge that would bring incomprehensible suffering to the whole earth because of the supposed transgressions of *some* Americans. What about the good people in our country? What about righteous folks around the world? The evidence shows that the virus afflicts scoundrels and saints alike. If this is punishment that reflects the proper execution of God’s justice, one must ask the question, how just is a God who is absolutely unworried about “collateral damage” that afflicts the righteous for other folks’ sins?

To agree with this view, it seems, one would have to take issue with Jesus who said that he came “*not in order to condemn the world, but in order that the whole world might be saved through him*” (John 3:17) and “*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly*”. (John 10:10) One would also have to disaffirm the clear teaching of scripture in 1 John 4 that “*God is love*”, and substitute the words, God is angry and retributive.

If we were to accept this idea of pandemic punishment, we’d have to believe that God is OK with taking it (God’s wrath) out disproportionately on the poor, the minorities and the marginalized, given the fact that Blacks are infected and die at 2.3 times the rate of whites and that COVID infection and death rates correlate very strongly with the degree of income inequality present in any given community. We’d have to believe those things knowing that God has a history of advocating for the downtrodden, rather than deepening their suffering. That’s what the prophets taught over and over and over again, isn’t it? In fact, that’s what Jesus made clear in his very first sermon in his hometown synagogue. (Luke 4:18)

So what would we actually learn if we were to agree that God is just fine with the sending of a deadly plague to destroy bodies and shatter communities? It seems as though we’d learn that Jesus was mistaken when he said “*God sent the son into world not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*”. (John 3:17) It seems that what we’d learn that God does not practice the grace and forgiveness that Jesus teaches that his followers should practice. We would have to buy into the notion that WE are more gracious than God ... and that seems *really* unlikely.

Do I believe that God is “trying to teach us something”? Do I believe that God would wield such a blunt, indiscriminate instrument of death until we “learn our lesson”? If there were a “lesson” to be learned, don’t you think God would make it clear enough that we would not be left saying, “God must be trying to teach us *something*.”

In point of fact, hasn't God already taught us very clearly what God wants us to know? *God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6:8) Hasn't Jesus been clear? *"I give you a new commandment that you should love one another. As I have loved you so also you should love one another. (John 13:34) "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'* (Matthew 22:37-40) Admittedly, sometimes we're crummy on the execution part of this, but I would contend that we already know what God desires of us.

All of that said, I do believe that God is at work even, maybe especially, in this time of death, destabilization, depression and pandemic. We should be clear, however, that there is a huge difference between saying that God is trying to teach us something by giving us the plague, and saying that we can learn some things from it and, perhaps, even be blessed by God in the midst of it. (Spoiler alert: I believe the latter and not the former!)

Here is what I know about God in these difficult times based upon the whole witness of Holy scripture: Right now, in the midst of the mess, God enters in and walks with us; even and especially in the worst of it. Right now, as in every other time, God is working to bless us and to bless others with good things. God is there to accompany and strengthen those who have fallen ill. God is there with families who are devastated by the fact that they cannot visit with their family members as they lay ill and dying. God is there to bless the efforts of physicians, nurses, medical staff and first responders as God's own agents of healing. God is there to bring hope to those who are losing homes and businesses and all the rest. God is there to give strength to parents who now, in addition to all that taxed and challenged them before the pandemic, have also taken on the role of teacher and tutor for their children. Moreover, I know that God is there encouraging us, as followers of Jesus, to be at work in the world as agents of healing, hope, strength and joy in the lives of the many who are hurting.

While I do not believe that God has given us the virus to teach us a thing or two, I am convinced that the pandemic and the massive disruptions associated with it has given us the opportunity to discover (or rediscover) important truths and to recognize more clearly some of God's greatest blessings. As the world has become chronically unpredictable and uncertain, we can learn again how blessed we are to be the recipients of the unchanging absolutely predictable love of God. As a tiny little virus humbles us and puts us on our knees, we have the opportunity to take in the truth that we are far more vulnerable than we ever admit, and far more dependent upon the grace of God, a God who is absolutely loving and good. Having lost the opportunity to gather with my family in faith every Sunday and to join together in prayer, praise and thanksgiving, I am only now coming to realize the magnitude of the blessing that I have

enjoyed in the gathering of the faithful... and taken for granted. Having lost the opportunity to hug my children, gather around a table with them and share a meal, and just hang out with them, I have become acutely aware their presence in my life as a gift of God like no other.

Of course the stay at home order has given many of us the unprecedented opportunity to reconnect with and share more than a passing moment in an otherwise freighted schedule with those who live under our own roof. I was talking with one our members last week who said that for the first time in years she had the opportunity and the inclination to sit outside and observe the natural order - all of the budding and blossoming and regeneration that mark Spring. It led her to some thoughtful moments around Gods ongoing renewal of all that is. (That's a most helpful thing, when the world is focused on death and destruction.) If we are willing to go there, we can see more clearly in this time of pandemic the fault lines in our economy and our society, and our responsibility as disciples of the one who embodied compassion and love to do the same.

So no, I do not believe that God has afflicted us with this pandemic in order to teach us *something*, and I do not agree with Pat Robertson and those who are convinced that we are living through the expression of God's righteous indignation with us for specific sins. Rather, I believe Jesus who said, "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

I pray that in this time of infection and fear, you might learn Jesus' lesson well. I'll try to do the same.

***Pastor Brown***