

What Does the Church Do in Times of Pandemic?

Brothers and sisters, I have greatly wrestled with this over the past several weeks. But I am a person of context. That is, to help me go forward, it is always helpful to look back. Now, the greatest “context setter” is God’s Word—the Holy Scriptures!

However, as well, the Church through the centuries, has lived through many times of epidemics, emergencies and contagion.

In 165 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a devastating epidemic of smallpox moved through the Roman Empire. During a span of 15 years, 25-30% of the population died. The Church, emphasizing the love of God and charity for the neighbor, were better able to cope with this plague than the pagan world around them. Importantly, they offered an account and a response. Christians could bear witness that the brokenness and disease seen in the world was a result of the fall into sin, but also that God provided comfort and certainty in the time of crisis, namely His Son Jesus Christ. The forgiveness Jesus brings, and the promise of eternal life allowed the Church to stand distinct from the pagan, Roman culture. They gave an account for the hope that was in them. As well, because of this hope, the Church responded by being on the front lines in providing human care to the neighbor in need. The love for the neighbor flowed from the love God had shown them. “For the love of Christ compels us, because we have concluded this: that One has died for all, therefore all have died; and He died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him Who for their sake died and was raised.” (2 Cor. 5:15-16) Christians, against the pagan practices, lovingly cared for their neighbor, regardless of who they were. The Church at this time of crisis had a message to offer and actions that flowed from their doctrine.

In more recent history for us in the Lutheran Church, we have another example of the Church’s response to epidemic. In 1527, the bubonic plague swept through the German peoples, including Luther’s town of Wittenberg. At its height, the mortality rate ranged from 30 to 90 percent. The Plague was carried by vermin and transferred to humans by fleas through cuts and abrasions; breathing the air polluted by germs also spread the disease. The sickness manifested quickly after a short incubation period, causing fever and a rapid pulse. Next, boils would break out, and if penetrated into the lymph nodes, infected the bloodstream. Death came suddenly, even to an apparently healthy person.

So, what did the Church do in this time of crisis? We have a window into Martin Luther’s approach through his letter, *Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague*. This was written to a fellow pastor in 1527, over the course of months, as Luther’s household, pregnant wife and son, were infected. What Luther provides is a faithful, measured response in time of crisis and panic.

First of all, he emphasized the role of vocation and responsibility, as a way of evaluating what one should do. Whether a pastor or a public official, to abandon one’s duties is anathema to

God's will and desire. But Luther also recognized the need for care and medicine. He warns against being "over-bold" and those who scorn ordinary precautions. He calls this "tempting God", Who creates medicine and intellect to care for our bodily health and others. Reckless endeavors were to be avoided, as was unnecessary contact with the sick. His was a measured, nuanced approach: stay true to our duties that God has given us in all cases, but avoid recklessness, even if being faithful. He also advised those who were sick should keep away from others. It is an act of love and service to prevent someone else from needlessly contracting one's own disease.

Above all, Luther put his trust in his physician and nurse—God. "What an attendant he is! What a physician! Friend, what are all the physicians, apothecaries, and attendants in comparison to God? Should that not encourage one to go and serve a sick person, even though he might have many contagious boils on him as hairs on his body, and though he might be bent double carrying a hundred plague-ridden bodies! What do all kinds of pestilence or devils mean over against God, who binds and obliges himself to be our attendant and physician?" Ultimately, it is God Who is our Savior and healer. Doctors treat, God heals. Again, Luther does not advocate irresponsibility. Far from it. He directs those to live in their vocations and serve those God has given them. But ultimately we are to put our trust in the Lord.

So, what does the Church do? More personally, what does your pastor do in such a time that we live in? As seen in the first example, God has given us an opportunity to be a witness to Christ in what we proclaim and how we act. We don't irrationally follow the pagan world. We don't allow fear to consume us. We do not let panic and disorder make every decision. We are to be living witnesses to Jesus, both in word and deed. As a pastor, then, what does this look like?

Again, the context of Luther and his situation. In the letter, he outlined three actions for pastors and their people. First, a pastor is to admonish people to attend church and listen to the sermon so that through God's Word they might know how to live and how to die. Second, everyone should prepare in time and get ready for death by going to confession and taking the sacrament once every week or fortnight. Third, if someone wants the pastor to come, let the sick person do so in time while in the right mind and before the illness overwhelms the patient. Finally, we pray. I pray for my people and you for your pastor. "In closing, we admonish and plead with you in Christ's name to help us with your prayers to God so that we may do battle with word and precept against the real and spiritual pestilence of Satan in his wickedness with which he now poisons and defiles the world."

Therefore, looking at these examples, in short, we are to be the Church. If ever we should be the Church, it is now. We are to worship, in Word and Sacrament; we are to confess our sins and we are to visit and comfort the sick and dying. And this is what I intend to do. There is a balance between bold confession and love for the neighbor; Luther in his letter shows us this pragmatism.

And I think we can extend this into the world. If you are a mother, then take care of your children. If you are a teacher, then you are to teach. If you are a grocery store stock boy, then you are to stock the shelves. If you are a nurse, then you are to administer treatment. If you are a trash collector, then you are to pick up the trash. But we in the Church are to do so faithfully, cheerfully, and without fear. For we are comforted in all that God has done for us. We are comforted by the all-availing sacrifice from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He will not leave or abandon you. Ever.

It is of note that Luther in his time of crisis urged that daily services be conducted in the ministry of the Word. Technology makes this even more accessible and even virtual, however, what is clear is that God's Word is central to the role of Church in every time and place. Especially in this one.

In Christ,
Pastor Heaton