

Living Water, Spiritual Food

March 15, 2020 – 3rd Sunday in Lent, Year A

John 4:5-42 | St. Columba's, Inverness | The Rev. Ari Wolfe

(transcript)

In an article in *Sojourners* magazine this week, Tiffany Firebaugh said, “In the midst of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, churches in America can be a valuable resource from a public health perspective. As a public health professional,” she continues, “I know that life-saving decisions can come down to valuing people over money, prioritizing humility over ego, and listening to the vulnerable over the powerful.”

She talks about how central these values have always been for people of faith, how many of us have, throughout our lives, “practiced (them) through ritual and through conversation,” noting that to her, “A public health crisis is simply the point in time in which these values become **visibly practical** rather than simply countercultural.”

What a great way to look at it!

As I'm sure many of you may have noticed, the word "crisis" has been used rather liberally throughout newscasts and online posts this week, and it seems to be on everybody's tongue. I'm not saying it's unwarranted - I can see what the world is going through, especially in the hardest hit areas, and it's sobering to watch.

I have a friend who lives in Rome, and she says the empty streets, closed businesses and waiting in line a yard apart from each other to get into the grocery store are "surreal" - and I'm sure they are.

A little closer to home, my son is having to come home two months early from a semester spent studying in Spain, which has just been put under lockdown in the same way as Italy was a week ago. When he gets back, he will go through several hours at the airport and then be under mandatory self-quarantine for two weeks which will unfortunately include his birthday - but we'll be glad to know that he's home.

It can be overwhelming to hear the dramatic voices of newscasters and politicians;

a global pandemic is not an easy thing to think about, and fear does not necessarily bring out the best in our species.

The two extremes that I've seen are complete panic on the one hand - people buying huge quantities of everything from hand sanitizer to toilet paper, meat and dairy products to dried beans; and dismissive unconcern on the other hand - saying it's not as bad as it looks, it's bad "over there" but we'll be fine "over here."

And as is so often the case, the truth is likely between those poles, in what we Episcopalians like to call the *via media*, the middle road. It's not a bad philosophy to hold to, and it seems to me that it might be exactly what's called for right now: informed concern and calm consideration.

Going a step further in her article, Firebaugh offered that, "A pandemic of this magnitude is an opportunity to ask ourselves: What is the true function of community? Does a community function to meet together, or does it function to serve one another, to put one another first?"¹

¹ Firebaugh, Tiffany "The Church's Role in a Pandemic." Sojourners Magazine online. <https://sojo.net/articles/churchs-role-pandemic?fbclid=IwAR3Of3VgmcAbGC1q7dqD8rMk0nbDYbAfQcnOgaDD8yIsATlaCsD6kmUoerM>

My own answer, as a deacon, and an Episcopalian, (and truthfully, as a human being), is unequivocally the latter: *community* functions - and must function - to “put one another first.”

So, we also need to be careful that we do so from a place of safety for ourselves... much like the instruction of a flight attendant for adults to put on their own oxygen mask in the event of an emergency first, before helping their children or neighbors, we need to keep ourselves healthy as well, so that we will be strong enough to reach out and help others.

Which is why we find ourselves here on a Zoom conference, sharing worship and community in a “virtual” St. Columba’s. Welcome to the Lenten practice that none of us knew we’d be taking on this year! Or as my friend posted in her church’s bulletin a few days ago, “I’ll bet none of you ever thought that you’d be giving up church worship for Lent.”

I was talking with Father Vincent a few days ago about how we were going to meet up, how we were going to worship this morning, and part of the discussion was on how to make an online experience communal, right? That while we aren’t sharing the

Eucharistic meal, we can still have **Communion**. ... and our gospel reading for the week actually shows us how:

Jesus said to the woman at the well, "...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" and to his disciples who were worried that he hadn't had anything to eat, he said, "*My food* is to do the will of him who sent me and complete his work."

So the original *communion* that Jesus shared, then, was metaphorical and spiritual - not wine and bread yet, but what he called the *living water* of eternal life and the spiritual *food* of "completing God's work" - spreading the Gospel, the "good news," the Truth about *who our neighbors are*, the importance of caring for those around us who are in need; the need to cultivate a richer understanding of how the Spirit works in our lives, and coming to know the **deep and abiding Love** that is always here for us.

Jesus taught that what *feeds* us is doing God's will and that we do God's will by serving each other.

And it occurs to me that right now, in the midst of a global health crisis that has just been declared a "pandemic," we need

that *Living Water* and that *spiritual Food* more than ever - we need it, and so does the rest of the world.

So here we are, sharing metaphorical nourishment, even as Jesus did in his time, though maybe in a different way. We're finding new and unexpected ways to come together in community... like gathering online for worship, for meditations, for discussions... connecting on FaceBook or other social media sites, staying in touch by phone and email; embracing the deeply-needed work of being present for one another, holding each other and the world in prayer... and in as many ways as we can, we need to reach out to support and nurture those in need around us.

Remember to feed and water *yourself* also - both physically and in spirit - so that you will have the strength to give to others. The *Word* (the Truth, Knowledge of God, Love, Compassion for others) that Jesus teaches us is the nourishment that we need to spiritually thrive; it feeds our souls. Stay safe, be healthy, eat well, drink well, wash your hands often - and remember to laugh and find joy, even in the midst of such times!

Something in the poem that we read by Lynn Ungar kept on coming back to me as I was going through this, so I will leave you with this thought: “Sing, pray...**center down**. And when your body has become still, reach out with your heart.” Amen.

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Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

—Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

<http://www.lynnungar.com/poems/pandemic/>