

“Burden”
May 10, 2020

Jeremiah 6:13-15
Matthew 11:28-12:8

Let's start with current events this morning.

As you might have heard, the Vice President was in Iowa last Friday, talking with what was called a group of “faith leaders” about the importance of resuming what was called “religious services” in our state. With the exception of one rabbi and one Roman Catholic bishop, however, all of these “faith leaders” were evangelical Christians, some of whom are very well known for their work to remove the rights of LGBTQ people and restrict the reproductive rights of women.

The Interfaith Alliance made it clear that in excluding mainline Protestants from the conversation, our Governor and the Vice President left out the largest block of religious Iowans, stating that “Iowa’s faith community is actually quite diverse and consists of more than the evangelical Christian community.”

Although we were left out, because the Vice President was treading on our turf, and speaking about churches and when and where we worship, I watched a portion of this conversation. There was so much talk about the “shepherds” in government and in Washington and some references to the “good shepherd” that I briefly thought that I could simply repeat my sermon from last Sunday this morning—I was ahead of the curve! And while I’ve thought better of that, if you heard any clips from that meeting last Friday, you might want to give last Sunday’s sermon a second hearing—or a first hearing if you missed it. Spoiler alert: the “shepherds” are usually not as good as they want to think that they are.

But what disturbed me more was the Vice President’s statement that canceling religious services in the name of slowing the spread of the Covid-19 has “been a burden” for churches.¹

In response, let me be as clear and as respectful as possible: No!

This is not a burden in any real, meaningful sense.

Yes, we miss each other.

Yes, we will be glad to return to this beloved sanctuary when it is safe for everyone to do so.

And yes, we have readily responded to the burden this pandemic is placing on those who live on the margins of our community: refugees and immigrants, the hungry and homeless, the poor.

But no, this is not a burden. We have readily and with love and compassion for others taken the responsible action of cancelling in-person worship services. We still worship. We still are the church. If it is a “burden,” then, as Jesus suggests, that burden is light.

Because it is not a burden to stay separated so that all might be well, I find myself in agreement with David Kaufman, rabbi of Temple B’nai Jeshurun in Des Moines, who said at Friday’s

meeting: “We are pretty much in a position of uniformly believing that *it’s too early to return to personal worship*. It’s inadvisable at the moment particularly with rising case counts in communities where we are across the state.”

Now after meeting with that group of primarily conservative Christians, the Vice President met with grocery and agriculture leaders, excluding the people who do the work in the meat packing plants, like those about 30 miles away at the Tyson Foods pork plant in Perry where 730 employees — nearly 60% of its workforce — have tested positive for the coronavirus. Jorge Soto, 23, said his aunt is one of them and has been hospitalized this week. “What’s a little heartbreaking,” he says, “Is I can’t hold a conversation with her. After every fifth word she has shortness of breath and starts coughing,” Rossanna Rosa, a Des Moines infectious disease doctor, called the situation at the Perry plant “a scandal” that has sickened many immigrants and refugees.

At the White House on Wednesday, the Vice President praised our governor and said Iowa has been “leading the pack.” While the Vice President has said that our state’s response to the pandemic is “a success story,” the reality seems to point in a different direction.

He came to Des Moines, where a recent rise in confirmed infections has alarmed the mayor and medical officials. More than 100 patients with COVID-19 are hospitalized in Polk County, and Karl Keeler, of MercyOne Central Iowa said: “Our community spread of the virus remains high. We have a lot of work to do.”

Des Moines Mayor Frank Cownie said he worried the state was reopening too quickly without adequate testing in place and potentially two to four weeks before the virus hits a peak here. “We can see an economic recovery,” he said, “but if you lose your life because of some wrong decisions, there is no tomorrow.”

The governor says Iowa has been averaging 2,900 tests daily, an increase from a month ago. But that is far short of what experts say is needed for Iowa to reopen safely, and many people say they are unable to get tested.²

That’s current events.

But you didn’t join this worship service for current events.

The question we ask, then, is how do we understand current events in the light of scripture?

Now, all of us who study the Bible—and especially those of us who preach—are constantly reminded that our world is not like the ancient world. Ancient ways of understanding the world were different from ours. To *interpret* scripture we must always be aware of this, seeking first to understand the original ancient mindset and only then to apply those ancient words to the much different age that is our own.

But as one person commenting on the ancient words of Jeremiah writes: “The several times that the prophet specifically identifies the social sins of the people makes us aware that the gap between then and now, which often seems so large, is hardly there at all, at least when it comes to speaking about the personal and corporate injustice of a community.”³

With those words, the chasm between the ancient world and the past week seems to be filled. The prophet's voice brings God's judgment to our pandemic response:

They dress my people's wound,

but on the surface only,

with their saying, "All is well."

All is well?

Nothing is well.

Not only in Iowa—states across our country are reopening with no regard for the federal government guidelines—and indeed, it looks as though the federal government is trying to bury those guidelines.

"Go out and get some fresh air and sunshine" seems to be the new way of dealing with a disease that has killed more people in two months than the long, slogging war in Vietnam.

The President is now questioning the value of extensive testing as the gap between available capacity and the amount that would be required to meet public health benchmarks has become clearer, saying Friday that "testing isn't necessary." This as he also vowed last week to eliminate every provision of the Affordable Health Care Act.

Of the more than 40 states, including Iowa, that are lifting restrictions, none are in full accordance with guidelines developed by the White House coronavirus task force.

[As one person said recently: "It's a long and difficult road and after we climbed halfway we decided it was too hard and decided to roll back down the Hill."⁴]

In all of this I am left with the suspicion that the push to quickly reopen places of worship—and let's be honest, the vast majority people in that meeting on Friday were really only concerned about *churches*—the push to quickly reopen places of worship seems to have a political motivation and shows no concern for the well-being of congregations or of the individual worshipping members.

How did the prophet put it? "From the least of them to the greatest, everyone is greedy for unjust gain... They do not know how to blush."

All is well?

Nothing is well.

And nothing will become well by saying this will all just go away

or by quickly allowing churches to have in-person worship services again.

Nothing is well.

If our leaders cannot or will not recognize this, let us, together, see this truth and speak this truth to power.

The only way all will become well is if we speak and act.

It is up to us. This is our challenge, our opportunity, and our calling.

Let us continue to face the difficult new reality together—even as we are apart.

Let us continue to respond to the suffering around us together—even as we are apart.

And let us also continue to do the ministry and mission that we are already doing, recognizing that we have a great task ahead of us,

that we have the strength for it,

and that the burden is light.

Let us pray: God of ages, in your sight nations rise and fall, and pass through times of peril. Now when our land and our world are troubled, be near to judge and save. May leaders be led by your wisdom; may they face reality, and see it clearly. Help us to turn once more and walk in your ways. Give us your light and your truth to guide us that in time all might be well; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ <https://whotv.com/news/coronavirus/vice-president-pence-speaks-with-iowa-faith-leaders-on-resuming-religious-services/>

² <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/pence-visit-des-moines-amid-increase-covid-19-70562339>

³ Anthony Salidinari, NIB, Jeremiah, pg. 630.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/opinion/coronavirus-public-shaming.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>