

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Thursday, October 8, 2020

COVID Precautions According to St. Paul

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters..... Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. —Romans 14:1, 19

The matter of COVID etiquette has caused no small amount of conflict in our world and opinions vary widely as to what is a wise and necessary precaution. Should one mask out of doors? Are small gatherings okay? Large gatherings? No gatherings? Convictions vary considerably, and the problem is accentuated by a lack of a single universal standard. In light of the virus how is one to responsibly run a business, a club, a family? Some are trying to make a point by pushing the rules one way or another, and I find our presidential campaign a sadly amusing illustration of this. One candidate pushes the boundaries of non-mask wearing to prove an independent American kind of free spiritedness while the other wears a mask when alone in the middle of the open prairie to prove that he is extra responsible and really cares. In the meantime, society, and the Church, feel the tension.

Commentators love to discuss disagreements such as these and present them as a new and unprecedented social tension. The Christian knows that the Church has faced similar kinds of disagreements in the past, and Paul offered wise counsel in dealing with such matters. The first century Church did not deal with masks and social distancing, but it did face profoundly differing opinions on significant matters of faith. In Romans 14, Paul speaks candidly to these matters. There were two major disagreements in the Church in Rome. First, there were differences between Jewish and Gentile believers over properly honoring Jewish holy days. Many, but not all, Jewish believers felt a deep obligation to fully honor major Jewish holy days. Others, primarily Gentile believers, were convinced that the Old Testament law had been fulfilled in Christ and was now obsolete, and such observances were a distraction, or worse, to Christian faith. The other and more uniquely Gentile hot topic was the matter of meat bought in the market which had been sacrificed to idols. In the ancient world idols were everywhere and nearly all the meat purchased in that day had been dedicated to a pagan god. Some Christians became vegetarians over this and felt defiled by eating such meat. Others, including Paul, were convinced that such idols were powerless and silly, and that meat being dedicated to an idol amounted to nothing for a Christian to fear. These debates may seem silly or trivial to us in our day, but with just a little imagination we can see how devastating such controversies could have been to the early Church! Paul used his apostolic authority to settle this dispute,

and I can see in my mind's eye the Roman believers hearing this letter, fresh from the mailbox, being read to them. When the letter came to this controversy, I can imagine that many were anxiously hoping that Paul would side with their opinion and then properly scold those on the other side! Paul's words were a great disappointment to such worldly hopes.

Paul urged the Romans, and all of us, to recognize such things as a matter of conscience. Those who feel God has called them to refrain from eating meat were urged to continue in that way. Those who felt correct before God in eating such meat were to keep on doing so. Each side of this debate were to respect their own consciences, and to respect each other! Don't judge others, insisted Paul. That is God's job and not yours. In fact, we are to more than respect differing Christian convictions, we are to do all we can to build up those believers as the brothers and sisters that they truly are. Some are shocked when they read these words of Paul, for many have come to think of the Apostle as a rigid and dogmatic leader. Paul lived out an amazing flexibility as he dealt with many kinds of Christians. What seems especially startling is how Paul plainly believed that refraining from marketplace meat as completely unnecessary and the sign of an inflated fear of idols. He had a definite opinion in that controversy, but realized it was an argument not worth "winning." Paul was tremendously concerned with the unity of the Church.

This COVID season has caused a great deal of conflict in countless congregations and I cannot say enough of how glad I am for the St. Luke's family and their wise, harmonious spirit. Naturally, we do not all agree on the exact path to take, but we have respected each other, honored our leadership and remained family! In this long battle against this persistent virus, let's count this as a victory.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

O God who has called men and women in every land to be a holy nation, a royal priesthood, the Church of your dear Son; unite us in mutual love across the barriers of race and culture, and strengthen us in our common task of being Christ and showing Christ to the world he came to save.

—John Kingsnorth