

Plain(s) Theology for a Pandemic Problem

Co-missioners,

Steve Kuhl has been writing a lot of reflections over the past several months for his Episcopal church in South Milwaukee. Last week he shared another one with us. It speaks to a dilemma that all too many congregations are wrestling with at the moment. We think you'll appreciate the care Steve takes in addressing it. You can credit his jumping-off point for the corny semi-pun embedded in our title for today.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community



Wisdom from "The Country Parson"

By Steven C. Kuhl

Sometimes we find words of wisdom in unexpected places. The newspaper clipping here is one of them. At our recent Early Birds Morning Prayer gathering, Jean Del Rosso told the story about how she and her daughter found it. Remember that her daughter Dianna and family had lost their house to a fire a couple of years ago. Well, as it came to pass, they were going through the boxes of books they had gathered up as salvage. One of the boxes had a Bible in it that they think belonged to Dianna's mother-in-law's grandmother.

Anyway, the Bible was old and tattered, and when they opened it, they found this clipping from an old *Minneapolis Star*. Entitled "The Country Parson," it dated back to 1964. I looked it up on the internet and, sure enough, "The Country Parson" was "a series of one-panel syndicated newspaper cartoons, always featuring a short aphorism or observation...created and written by Frank A. Clark (1911–1991) of Iowa, illustrated by Wally Falk and later Dennis Neal, and running from the late 1950s through the 1970s."

The message of the clipping still speaks to us today. Every "new day" is a gift from God that we could use for a "wonderful new start." But, unfortunately, too often we don't use it that way. What we tend to do instead is "complain" about the challenges it presents, forgetting that the new day also always carries over with it the things we messed up the day before. That carryover includes mess-ups big and small, of our individual making and our societal making too. The problem, therefore, is not with the "new day" God has given us. The problem is that we are "the same old selves" who made yesterday's problems and who continue

repeating them, and even multiply them today. As the very Bible the clipping was saved in tells us, we don't live our lives in accordance with the purposes for which God gave us the new day, we don't to love God above all things and we don't love our neighbor as ourselves.

As Christians we know what is needed to make a "wonderful new start" to each "new day" that God gives us. We practice it all the time in our liturgies when they invite us to confess our sins honestly in accordance with God's law and then to receive with confidence God's promise to forgive our sins according to his gospel. Confession and forgiveness is also the aim of the Word preached and the Sacraments given. The issue of "practicing" confession and forgiveness is not that we don't know how, but that we are prone to neglect it as we live out our daily lives. We neglect it, quite frankly, because our "old self" doesn't like it. It doesn't like to admit wrong, it doesn't like to make changes that would have us consider the well-being of others over our own comfort. Instead, to paraphrase Paul, it would rather have us think more highly of ourselves than we should" as if we were privileged than others (Rom. 12:3), and then to look to our own self-interests at the expense of the interests or needs of others (Phil. 2:4). The "old self" is that tendency in us to want what it wants when it wants, how it wants; and if that hurts, harms, or disadvantages others—too bad. Unfortunately, we see all too much of this "same old self" in each "new day" that God gives us. Hence, the "new day" doesn't turn out to be a "new start."

As the New Testament makes clear, the practice of repentance and forgiveness is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, an end that is really the work of the Spirit in us through the inviting Word. That end is the death of the "same old self" so that a "brand new self" may arise and replace it, a self that is best understood as Paul describes: "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Given the connection between repentance and forgiveness (the fear of God that arises on account of sin and the faith in God that arises on account of the love of Christ and the work of the Spirit) it is understandable why the ethos or way of life of this brand new self is variously called the fruit of repentance or the fruit of faith or the fruit of the Spirit. Paul describes these fruits in general terms like this:

...The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another (Gal. 5:22-26).

Of course, the outward expression of love, joy, peace, patience, etc. that this "brand new self" evokes in me can vary greatly,



depending on the circumstances that are presented me in the course of the "new day" God gives. What makes the "new day" different, then, is not that the carryover problems of the previous day are necessarily gone—usually they are not—but the way my "new self" begins to respond lovingly to them by the power of the Spirit. For now, the carryover of the old day into the new day still includes the coronavirus, racism, partisan power politics, and the like. There is no miraculous formula for preventing this kind of carryover. But through confession and forgiveness I can prevent that "same old self" of yesterday from carrying over into the new day. Through confession and forgiveness, I can welcome the death of my "same old self," marked by selfish pursuits, and look to God in Christ to forgive me and raise up in me a "brand new self," marked by selfless pursuits that embody the fruit of the Spirit.

What, concretely, might the "guidance of the Spirit" look like in your and my new self in this "Coronatide" as some have called it? What would it mean to love God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves in our present situation? Again, while each of us must evaluate our own situation, I think there are some general outlines that are pretty obvious. But here, I don't want to address the question of the individual Christian's vocation in the world, but life with one another as Christians, and, specifically, our worship life as a Christian community and how it relates to the world.

For the most part, before the pandemic, our actual, in-person act of gathering for worship was irrelevant to the world. We had our buildings and we gathered in them to do our thing. However, with the coronavirus that has all changed. In-person worship is now a super-spreader event that can endanger not only the Christian community, but the world in which we live. How to blend loving God (that is, attending to our need for God's Word) and loving our neighbor (that is, attending to our society's

need to live safely in the midst of the pandemic) is a question of paramount importance. Our need for God's Word (worship) and our society's need to mitigate the spread of the virus (public health) intersect in an unprecedented way. And here is the challenge. We are not called to worship God at the expense of public health and we are not called to maintain public health to the neglect of the worship/Word of God. We are called to do both, and to do both we cannot do things the same old way, that is, the way "our same old selves" may want to.

Therefore, in this time of pandemic, we will not be able to gather "in-person" for worship to honor God's Word as we did in the past. That traditional in-person gathering in the context of the pandemic would be what is called a "super spreader event." But that doesn't mean we cannot gather and honor God's Word together as community of faith. We can certainly gather together to worship and honor God's Word online. However, I also know that the "same old self" in me might say, "I don't like doing worship that way." And no one wants to deny or diminish the honest truth behind that feeling. Real sacrifices are being required of us at this time. But that "old self" is not all there is to me. God is also raising up in me a "brand new self" that thinks differently; and this "brand new self" can rightly say to that "same old self": "Enough with this selfishness; be thankful that God is providing us a way to both love God for his word and love our neighbor as ourselves; that's like the proverbial having your cake and eating it, too."

I want to thank Jean for sharing her little newspaper clipping with me. What wisdom is packed in this one little sentence. "A new day," even in the midst of a pandemic, "could be a wonderful new start for us if (only) we could keep from being our same old selves." Thanks be to God in Christ—we can! For through baptism and the Spirit a new self is emerging that is as mysterious as it is wonderful. Paul's describes it like this: "I have been

crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:19b-20).