

Dual Epidemics

August 29, 2021

Here we are living in another one of those “unprecedented times!” A friend said, “It just feels like everything is out of control. Everything’s getting on my last nerve.”

In the writings and in the news reports, in conversations, the response of anger and anxiety seems to be mounting about every direction you turn. And I like what John LePuk said one morning, “We all need to uncoil. We need to uncoil.”

We’re troubled by the vicious resurgence of COVID-19 and the delta variant, the debates about vaccines, about children going to school, about governments and how to manage to protect the public health. We are impacted by the horrors and the unraveling disaster in Afghanistan, the plight of the Haitians climbing from the mud and the debris to try to build once again life. The wildfires in the west. The flood and now new hurricane coming in the south. And My Pillow Guy just won’t go away.

Our reading from Mark speaks about a contrasting understanding of humanity – what it is that we might draw close to the powerful, sacred presence of God in our lives. Episcopal priest and author Stephanie Spellers says:

“Jesus was born. Jesus entered as he did where he did doing what he did because God needed us to finally comprehend the truth. God is not a sky king who heads an empire; God is the love that gives itself away for the sake of more love.”

Jesus comes praying, healing, teaching a better way of life and centered in his full humanity.

“Love that gives itself away for the sake of more love.” Wow! Counterintuitive, sure; and... necessary to find unity in the midst of a most disagreeable pandemic, without question. Jesus was not without fear or anger, but his life was controlled by love.

So, this week a television morning show featured the popular performer, Lizzo. This announcement came in response to the prospect of FaceBook leaking the negative comments and hate messages targeting the performer. These posts violated policies against hate speech, bullying on social media after she and Cardi B released their video called “Rumors.”

“Sometimes the world don’t love me back. Doesn’t matter how much positive energy you put into the world, you still get people who have something mean to say about you. What I don’t accept is (on) doing this to black women over and over and over again. When we don’t fit into the box that you want to put us in. You just unleash hatred unto us. It’s not cool.”

Sadly, a sign of the times. Kudos to Lizzo for an honest response.

Frederich Buechner has a helpful perspective on anger.

“Of the seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

In some profound ways, “We need to uncoil.” And, I believe the church can help. It is as if we are living in the midst of two simultaneous epidemics. One epidemic centers on health and safety concerns, what we consume. COVID, Delta, school and work, economy closures.

The other epidemic centers on what we produce, how we choose to respond to the animosities and irrational anger. This second epidemic is more basic and intrinsic, mean spiritedness and general lack of respect and concern for anyone other than ourselves. This is the one Jesus refers to with a sick heart, a heart that defiles the humanity of the person.

For the Psalmist: “O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” In other words, how does one draw close to God? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart.

For the Pharisees and the Scribes, there was a more specific, somewhat ritualistic question. And it sounds a little bit like “shaming.”

“So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’”

Jesus is carrying on a grand scale tour of duty up north, far from the establishment religious center in Jerusalem. Just before this in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is feeding the hungry multitudes. Mark also notes that Jesus is teaching and healing with the disciples on both sides of the Sea of Galilee around Gennesaret, ministering to both Jews and Gentiles. This is important; part of the new thing Jesus is doing.

There was also the Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin who begs for crumbs from Rabbi Jesus and her daughter when first rebuffed by a busy Jesus. Jesus reverses his attitude and the daughter is healed. Later in this same section, hearing and speech is restored to the deaf man living in the Gentile area known as the Decapolis.

The fact that the Pharisees and Scribes traveled this far from their own territory suggests that there may be a little jealousy in the questions they spring on the disciples. “Who do you think you and your non-conforming disciples are, Jesus?”

The critique against the disciples' cleanliness habits is a kind of shaming! How does one draw near to the divine presence and the sacred quality of our lives? Their focus was a ritual about eating. For the Pharisees and Scribes, it is a ritual prescription, an inoculation against degradation of the human spirit. "Shame on your disciples, Jesus."

So, in fact, Jesus flips the script! Not what you take in (consume), it is what you find emanating from your heart (production). A right life is not about the stomach, but the heart. Here is a new prescription: a right and healthy heart!

Jesus calls the Jewish leaders to accountability with a word from the prophet Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Care for orphans and widows. He interprets the traditions for the Gentiles in the crowd and teaches the disciples about what is really more important.

At first this clever saying of Jesus sounds like a great 'gotcha' moment. But, it is so much more! Whoa! Wait a minute. We have met the enemy and they are us!

Split Epidemic Tracts

Joel Marcus writes in the Anchor Bible commentary:

"The basic problem Christians should be concerned about, Mark seems to be saying through this striking pileup [of the word *anthrōpos*], is not how or what one should eat, but the internal corruption of human spirit. It is this malignancy that chokes the life out of tradition, turns it into an enemy of God, contorts it into a way of excusing injustice, and blinds those afflicted by it to their own culpability for the evils that trouble the world."
Joel Marcus, Mark 1-8 (Anchor Bible 27; NY: Doubleday, 2000), 460-61.

Jesus preaches to "turn around," or in Greek *metanoia*, which literally means to "change your mind." It does not mean self-flagellation or being really down about ourselves, which is what the word "repent" has implied for most of us. It always involves an attitude of trust, letting go, and surrender. Originating with the Hebrew prophets, the biblical idea of *metanoia* is that of a change of mind and heart, a full turning around, a whole new transformation of one's mentality and level of consciousness, more than following a "right" ritual or lingo or shaming the OTHER or yourself!

So, I want to say, on one hand, be careful what you consume – it will impact your health. But, even more on the other track take great care and with humility may we be careful how we respond to the nasty vitriol that is out there. Church, we need to work together to foster and extend Jesus' model. We need to pay attention to what the New Testament later came to call the "Fruits of the Spirit!"

The realm of God is right here, right now, in the present tense. The relationship with God's love that sets us free is in our midst. Here we fight the other, more infectious disease. The wars are being waged in what attitudes we produce from deep within our lives. Jesus warns the defilement of our lives in, slander, pride, theft and anger among other sad, misguided and evil intentions. (Anger is so blatant at every turn.)

Here Jesus warns of the long-standing epidemic of humanities dilemma. You can talk all the nice religious language and protest the encroachment on your freedoms and personal rights... but a priori, first and foremost, you are to care for the neighbor... to love them as much as you are busy loving yourself!

This is not anti-Pharisee! In the case of the Pharisees and Scribes the teaching of Elders were a mechanism well designed to INTERPRET the laws of Moses, to put a protective fence around the Law. Mark's account in Chapter 7 moves beyond the dialogue about the Law to a consideration of humanity.

Here's how Brian McLaren describes it:

“Jesus forms a movement of people who trust him and believe his message. They believe that they don't have to wait for this to happen, but rather that they can begin living in a new and better way now, a way of life Jesus conveys by the pregnant phrase kingdom of God. Life for them now is about an interactive relationship—reconciled to God, reconciled to one another—and so they see their entire lives as an opportunity to make the beautiful music of God's kingdom so that more and more people are drawn into it, and so that the world is changed by their growing influence.”

Jesus refutes the legalists, instructs the new converts and teaches his disciples. And the lesson's carried forward!

The books of James and Galatians and Ephesians all pick up on the challenge from Jesus. And, James offers alternatives:

“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.”

And, later:

“Care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

And this from Galatians 5:

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

These days, one of my favorite philosophers makes it a practice as the family is sitting down to dinner. As those at the table begin to dig into the food, she will ask, “How were you brave and kind today?” Turning to each person at the table, “How were you brave and kind today?” Truth be told, turning to the youngest members around the table, she may also ask, “Have you washed your hands before dinner?”

To me, this seems to run somewhat parallel to the readings today. Both questions are important. But, each is quite unique in character. One is good hygiene (clean hands); the other pushes us to look within and come clean before the divine spirit of the living God!

Here's to a pure and healthy heart to respond: How will you be joyful, today? Loving? Will you show kindness today?

So may it be. So we may live!

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