

Christ among Coronavirus

L4-20, March 22, 2020
Mk 12:28-34

The Rev. Dr. Chris Hagen
Lake Nokomis L. Ch., Mpls

*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!*

This long-standing hymn has been a favorite for generations.

It reassures when we doubt our standing with God,
doubt whether God cares or whether there is even a god who notices.

The hymn describes an intimacy with God,
that of a true friend who is there when we need one.

The language of the New Testament has several words for affectionate relationships.

The word of this hymn is φίλος (philos, as in Philadelphia),
the kind of affection that one has for one's ethnic group, one's neighbors,
the affection of *friends*.

It means to regard someone as one's own people, those like us.

So in this hymn,

Jesus is like us, knows us,
knows our griefs and fears and trials,
"knows our every weakness,"

And we can respond to one as close as this,
seeing personal connection to Jesus, showing the same affection to our Lord.

What a *friend* we have in Jesus,
a true friend who is there for us, whom we can count on.

But that is not the word Jesus uses in this gospel reading.

Jesus quotes from Old Testament law,
quotes from Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Joshua,¹
and the word he uses is ἀγάπη (agape).

ἀγάπη love is more than affection, more than belonging to people like us.

ἀγάπη love is *inner-will to take action for the good of another*,
the kind of love that does what is right, whether for friend or for stranger.

It is the commitment of health care workers,
showing up to do their job for complete strangers in this time of pandemic.

It is neighbor calling up neighbor to see if they are OK.

It is the dedication of staff at Simpson House here in south Minneapolis
making difficult decisions between risking the spread of coronavirus in the shelter
and turning away the vulnerable homeless,
exposing them to freezing weather and physical violence.

These last couple of weeks I have been nagged by *what is church to be about*
as the world confronts COVID-19.

Does church have *any role at all* in response to coronavirus?

This church, Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church, is a wonderful people, honestly trying to live as God desires.

You have *friends* here.

You can identify with the people who come here, they are from your neighborhood, people like you.

This church is a good, friendly group of people.

So, what is this church about in the face of COVID-19?

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all relate this incident of adversaries

asking Jesus what is the foremost, most important commandment of all the Bible?

Jesus sums up all the Bible with love God with your whole self and love neighbor as your self.

¹ Lev. 19:18, Dt. 6:4-5, Joshua 22:5 (Septuagint version).

The Luke version has Jesus following up the great commandments with the parable of the Good Samaritan.²
The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious for its robbers.

It was dangerous.

A man was beaten, robbed and left for dead.

A priest passed by, and a Levite; they could not afford to take the risk of being attacked themselves.

They had to stay safe and distant.

An outsider, a Samaritan, one who knows exclusion and scorn, stops to help and takes to safety.

What does it mean to love?

Our church is taking precautions in this infectious season.

Our office staff are vulnerable as people enter the building for various reasons.

We are trying to keep things operating while staying safe.

Then this past week a homeless man walked in the office asking for *pants*.

He was distressed and upset.

He had soiled his pants and asked for a clean pair.

The odor choked the room.

Where else could he go if not *church*?

He needed to clean up.

He needed to calm down.

He needed to wash clothes.

He needed someone to talk to.

In this infectious season we take precautions.

But now we are faced with what to do about someone desperate.

Who else could he turn to?

In the heat of the moment we shooed him out the door.

I was relieved that he went away.

We did not know if he had *coronavirus*;

he certainly had *something* in his bowels.

Our office staff wiped down the door handles and surfaces,

sprayed Lysol to disinfect and cover the smell.

But I can't shake the thought of my being the priest and Levite

who passed by on the other side of the road to avoid the man robbed.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious for its robbers.

It was dangerous.

People took risks when exposed on the road.

One had to take precautions.

It was uncertain what laid in wait.

But the Samaritan saw it differently.

The Samaritan also knew the dangers.

The Samaritan also was concerned for safety.

But the Samaritan saw it differently.

The priest and Levite worried about *their own* safety.

The Samaritan worried about *the other's* safety.

What would happen *to him* should I pass by.

What will that homeless man who needed pants do now?

How will *he* get clean?

How will *he* be safe?

I can't shake the nagging thought.

What is the role of church in the face of this infectious season?

What is our role in caring for those most vulnerable in this time?

What risks do we take to secure the safety of man on the road to Jericho?

How do we live *αγαπη* love?

² Luke 10:29-37.