

Pandemic Voices

Romans 12:9-21

The Rev. Erica Wimber Avena

August 30, 2020

Prayer: *Lord help us to re-order our priorities in this time of reflection, so that we may align ourselves with the new work your spirit is doing in our lives and in the world...*

We sang: Tell me the Stories of Jesus I love to hear; things I would ask him to tell me if he were here. ...if he were here...

I am recording this on Thursday, a rainy day in Connecticut. The headlines this morning are:

- hurricane Laura is hitting the Louisiana coast: the hurricane center is warning those good people: "Take action now to protect your life!"
- The NBA playoff games have been called off: The Bucks in Milwaukee started the boycott Wednesday to protest the shooting by police in nearby Kenosha, Wisconsin, of Jacob Blake.
- And the news is full of covid breakouts at colleges and other schools, including the Universities where two of my children are. There's a graph of the country on the New York Times site where I can follow each school's covid data, in detail.

For many, but not all of our schools, students are beginning this week. In a normal year I would emphasize that for children, going to school is their job, learning and helping are the main important focus points of any childhood. And that includes learning to be a friend, a good friend. But in years past, I have been taking for granted, like most of us do, our health. Of course, we have nothing, without our good health...and together, we are grappling with what can we do safely, what is playing it too safe, what is not safe enough.

This year children are worried about the health of their grandparents, and grandparents are worried about the health of their grandchildren. Parents are holding their breath. Returning to school is always a major adjustment in family life... but now...

Hybrid model? Virtual? How will school go when we begin? We have a daughter in High School and though the school administration has emailed us more days than they haven't over the summer, we are still having a hard time picturing what school will look like, how it will go, on the bus? At lunch? Home room? Gym? How many kids in each class? What school supplies? ...and whether any in person instruction will last more than a few weeks. We all remember what happened in March when the kids were sent home...only to discover that it turned out to be for the rest of the year...no sports, no dances, scrambling *to learn to learn* virtually, online graduations...we won't be forgetting that anytime soon.

From the beginning of the pandemic many of us realized that we are in this together in important ways ... at the same time that we are profoundly separated. Covid19 is transmitted in communities, and we've had to unlearn our commitment to things that feel central to the fabric of our society, in order to protect one another. If you prevent yourself from getting it, you

protect yourself, which is good, but as important, you protect others from catching it from you, some of whom, down the line, may not be able to manage it. Flattening the curve, we are.

In this month of August, we have been reaching out to some of our members to lend their voices to this series we have been doing called "pandemic voices." Our aim has been to help one another to be mindful of how the pandemic has changed our lives. All of us have had to make changes, each of us feels that personally.

And this is where I'd like to ask you to take a deep breath, and although the news contains a lot to be concerned about, we need to find a way set our fears aside, and to walk in faith with imagination and creativity, interpreting faith for our time. Congregationalists are committed to something we call the "priesthood of all believers," which means I am not here to tell you how to live your life – the implications and the details are yours to work out. I am here to remind you of what you likely already know: that your life is important and how you live it matters: your words and your actions, AND what you do not say and what you do not do, have profound implications. God can and may well bless and amplify your efforts...in the way that can only be described as divine. We live on the edge of this mystery.

These words in Romans are in the tradition of wisdom literature, like the Old Testament proverbs, like the saying of Jesus. They are worth pausing over, reading and re-reading, every day until they are written in your own soul; close enough to your own heart so that they come to mind when you face your own crossroads and dilemmas:

12:9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

12:10 Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

12:12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints (*they called each other saints!*); extend hospitality to strangers.

12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

12:16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

12:18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

12:19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

12:20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In your life, what shape will this take? In your voice, what words will you use? This week, how will you give life to these words? And Paul encourages restraint in some areas, what can you refrain from doing, for the wider good?

Our final hymn today is "I love to tell the story" what story of Jesus and his love will you be telling? Pandemic voices... different this year, but it's the same Old, old story of Jesus and his love.

School is back in session, the trouble in the world is poignant this week. Tell the story, make it a good one, make it your own.

God be with us.

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