**May 17, 2020**

**John 14:15-21**

**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

This is a crazy time, isn’t it? I haven’t seen most of you since the first week in March. Some of you I have “seen” on Zoom as Bible Study or Session or Deacons have their meetings on computer screens. But most of you I haven’t seen in person since Sunday, March 8th. I used to be in Meijer at least three times a week, but I haven’t set foot in there in two months. And when I do order groceries, we wipe them down with antibacterial cloths before we put them away. I wear a mask for the few times that I do go out and I realize now that it’s not only harder for people to understand me when I speak, but they don’t see when I smile, so I’m trying to develop the “eyebrow lift” so people will know when I smile. It’s a strange time for our society and a strange time for the church. We’re trying to discover how to be a community of faith when we can’t be a gathered community; we’re trying to discover how to be witnesses of Christ’s love to the ends of the earth when we’re supposed to stay home. It’s a unique time in the history of our country, it’s a unique time in the history of the church.

Except it’s not. Not really. You all know, of course that this is not the first time there have been pandemics, a world-wide disease that paralyzes much of civilization. We have lots of records of the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. That flu infected about a third of the world’s population and about 50 million people died, including 675,000 in the United States. We’re not close to that number, thank God. But pandemics have spread through the human population from time to time throughout recorded history. The most famous of which is obviously the Black Death which raged through Asia and Europe in the 14th Century, but that was not the first pandemic that we have records of. There was also a plague in Europe during the 6th Century that is often called Justinian’s Plague because it occurred during the reign the Emperor Justinian in Constantinople. I was reading about it this week because of an essay written by Craig Barnes, the president of Princeton Seminary. He speculates that it was Justinian’s plague that caused some monumental changes in the Christian church. He writes,

The sixth century was a long, horrible time in Rome. The city had long fallen to a succession of invading armies. The economy was in shambles. And the Plague of Justinian was ravaging the city. People were frightened for so many reasons. But it was also the century that gave us St. Benedict, who wrote the rule that still guides many monastic houses to this day. This rule included a daily rhythm of prayer, work, and the singing of the psalter—including the psalms of lament. Down through the centuries, and the succession of plagues to follow, the people took comfort in knowing that the monks were voicing their laments and petitions to God.

The sixth century also gave us St. Gregory, who reluctantly left one of those monastic houses to become the pope. Not only did Gregory take over the ecclesiastical leadership of the church, but he also sold church property in order to feed the people of Rome. He called himself “a contemplative condemned to action.” But his “action” entailed a careful balance of caring for the poor and developing a theology of prayer for the monasteries. In other words, Gregory saw cloistered prayer as an active way of caring for the world.

The monks weren’t trying to escape the problems of the world. They brought society’s pathos with them into the monasteries in order to devote themselves to a life of prayer for the world’s salvation.

This may be a time of frustration for us, not being able to be gathered together, but like Gregory and Benedict we should hear this as a call for us to have that daily rhythm of prayer and work and reading the scripture, to be in prayer for each other and the world, and to care for our neighbors and the least among us. Benedict and Gregory both believed that there were two necessities during such times of crisis. To pray and to serve. Because there is something at work among us, something happening.

Lots of you know that I have been asking for prayers for healing for my friend Greg for the last year or so. Greg is a friend from high school that was in our wedding and then we he finally got married nine years ago, he asked me to officiate. Greg and his wife Emily have two children, Esther who is six and Wyatt who is four. Greg also now has liver cancer. He has been trying to find the right treatment for this cancer. Greg and his family live in Iowa, but they are now in Houston and the MD Anderson Cancer Center receiving proton treatments. This process may take a month or more and so they’ve rented a house there from AirBnB. But when we talked this week, Greg admitted to me that one of the hardest things about this process is the feeling that he is alone. Of course, he has his family with him, but because of hospital restrictions, they can’t go with him each day when he gets his treatment. And it is also hard being in Texas because they are separated from their church, from their community of faith. As he and I discussed that, it occurred to me that it is not that different for everyone right now, we are all disconnected from one another. Or at least it can feel that way. We can feel like the Athenians, who had an altar to “an unknown God.” It may feel like we are lost, that we don’t know where God is or what God is doing. We feel separate from God and from God’s people. But are we really?

When St. Benedict withdrew from the cities and the ports during Justinian’s plague in the sixth century, he wasn’t separating from the people, he was separating in order to pray for the people, to place them in the hands of God. I think this is part of what Jesus means by his promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Because God has sent God’s Spirit to us, we stay connected to Jesus. As Jack read for us, Jesus promises that “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” And of course, the “you” in that sentence is plural. The Spirit is in us—all of us, whether we are gathered together or not, we are connected by the Spirit.

And so we are challenged in this time to do the same as St. Benedict and St. Gregory did so long ago—give ourselves to the Spirit in prayer and service. Pray for one another and the world, and take care of those around us. That’s why we are doing Morning Devotions and Evening Prayer, to take the world in our arms and give it to God. And that’s why we are doing whatever we can to make sure we all have the necessities we need, calling each other, taking groceries to those who can’t get out, providing Sunday School lessons that get dropped on the doorstep, giving food to the pantries so that no one goes hungry. We’re doing what the church is called to do and be. Again, Craig Barnes says about St. Gregory:

To be clear, his point is not that we might as well pray if we have nothing else to do while stuck at home. His ministry is a testimony that our prayers in humility are also a means of activism. We join 1,500 years of cloistered monks who brought the world’s laments before God in search of a vision of salvation. It’s hard to think of anything more effective than placing a sick world back in the arms of its creator and healer.

Through prayer, we demonstrate our resolve not to flee the dangerous virus and hide at home, but to turn those homes into monastic cells that actively call for God’s salvation to find its way to the ends of the earth. These are prayers not just for our family, our community, and our neighbors but for the world. The whole world needs our prayers for holy intervention today.

Pray and serve. That’s what we’re doing through this difficult time. Because that what we always do.