

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost: "The power is ours"

As most of you know, I am a proud father, and one of the great joys and privileges of fatherhood is the day-to-day conversations I get to have with my children about the current affairs that touch their lives. We discuss everything from the personal to the global.

Recently, there is one conversation we've been having quite frequently. One of my daughters has brought up quite often a bit of cognitive dissonance she feels and cannot seem to resolve. On the one hand she notes that we're being counseled right now to keep our distance from one another and being told that this is the best and kindest thing we can do for one another. And there is, of course, some empirical evidence to back this counsel up.

On the other hand, however, she notes that basic human instinct drives her, and probably most other people, to respond to times of challenge and stress by drawing closer to others and offering very tangible and bodily forms of support. And this too is backed up by empirical evidence. Dr. Vivek Murthy, a former surgeon general of the United States, notes that loneliness, even more than smoking or obesity, is the number-one contributing factor to premature death. And this is not simply speculation. There is evidence to back up such a claim.

And so we're caught between a rock and a hard place. There is counsel telling us to do one thing and innate impulse telling us to do the opposite, and both are coming from place of loving and caring for others. What are we to do?

Today's Scriptures don't really help in terms of a practical answer, but they definitely speak powerfully to a situation such as this one.

Asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus replies without hesitation. It's really two commandments, he says, but they're two sides of the same coin. Love God with every last bit of your being, and love your neighbor as yourself. Do that, and you've fulfilled the law in every respect.

And then St. Paul writes these tender words to the church in Thessalonica: "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

Well, maybe I need to revise what I said a moment ago. Perhaps these Scriptures do actually present us with a practical answer to our dilemma, but one that's a bit different from what we tend to expect.

Let's dwell for a moment on just a few key words. In Paul's love-letter like sentence, he specifically expresses the desire to share *our own selves* with the Thessalonians. In other words, he and his companions wish to share their strengths and weaknesses, their quirks and uniquenesses, the whole, uncensored package with their beloved brothers and sisters in Christ at this ancient church.

And Jesus' expression of the Great Commandment is equally specific: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and

with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Bring everything to the table, without exception. If something is in any way part of you, no matter how bizarre, shameful, or irrelevant you may believe it is, offer it up to God with love and gratitude.

These words run pretty counter to today’s culture, don’t they? We live in an environment that, albeit subtly, encourages us to suppress ourselves. Almost everywhere we turn we are told to trust the experts more than we trust ourselves.

It begins in our earliest days. As children, we receive the message from parents, teachers, and other adults in our lives that our instincts are base and misguided and that they know better than we do what we should think and how we should conduct our lives. And as adults, these authority figures are replaced by others who look more professional but are ultimately conveying to us the same message.

When it comes to how we nurture and strengthen our bodies, minds, and spirits, we are bombarded with messages telling us that others know more and better than we do. I encourage you to very much question this. No one knows better than you do how to care for you. No one has more power over your health, your destiny, and your prosperity than you do. No one. The power is yours, and that comes straight from God.

One obvious way to unpack this is in the spiritual realm. Even within our beloved church there are influences that suggest to us that others know better than we do. While it’s not as extreme as it is in certain forms of Christianity, our denomination is still fairly hierarchical in the way it’s organized. There’s an unspoken sense that the four recognized orders of ministry, lay, deacon, priest,

and bishop, are somehow at increasing heights on a spiritual ladder. This is patently false. Each order may have its unique roles and responsibilities, but this in no way changes the fundamental fact that each one of us is our own greatest spiritual expert. I have no more, and no less, of a direct pipeline to God than anyone else listening today. The collar is not some kind of spiritual credential.

The same holds true in every other vein of existence. The recognized experts in any field certainly deserve a fair and respectful hearing, as does everyone, but we never need to allow their words to mindlessly override what we innately know.

So perhaps today's Scriptures have some practical application after all. Perhaps they are indeed useful in dilemmas such as the one where experts tell us to keep our distance but compassion drives us to come up closer.

They don't tell us exactly what to do, but they are very clear on where to search for that answer. Search within. The answer is in you, and only in you.

And also recognize that when we all do that, the situation is going to be messy. When our neighbors search within themselves, they may not come up with exactly the same thing we do. So can we resist the urge to succumb to anger or fear when this happens? Can we recognize that even if someone else's answer to the dilemma is the polar opposite of ours, that person's motivations may be something very different from ignorance or malice? Can we remember that long, happy, and fulfilled lives may be the goal of both the person who wears a mask and quarantines strictly as well as the one who goes for a big bear hug?

Friends, I know it is tempting in confusing and stressful times such as these to search for singular answers, and I understand the allure of outside experts who seem to offer those singular answers. But it just doesn't work that way. As current events demonstrate, even when we try to farm our power and decision-making out to others, it's still a mess because we can't agree on which others to trust!

So let's do this the way today's Scriptures tell us to. Let's look within for the answers. Trust that you have the Spirit of God, right there in your heart and in your mind. And with that Spirit, you have the power, you have the knowledge, you have the wisdom. Trust yourself, and in doing so you will know exactly how to love God and your neighbor with every fiber of your being.