Pandemic as Paradox

by Paul Westermeyer

When we cannot gather with the members of Christ’s body to sing, confess our sins, hear the word of forgiveness and good news, know the peace of God, come to the table and the font, and then be sent into the world, we are in a famine, a starvation. Whatever Anfechtung (Luther’s term for overwhelming spiritual tribulation) attacks, the absences, vexations, temptations, and depression we are experiencing are not figments of our imaginations. They are realities that Christians have always known, and they are heightened in times of famine, plague, and war. In such times they are heightened individually and communally in a more silent and pernicious pandemic than a plague. All of our attempts to solve them with human solutions, no matter how creative, are human solutions. As we learned from Augustine long ago, they may provide Band-Aids but cannot substitute for our longing to rest in God.

As the church knows, the coronavirus reminds us that we are all vulnerable all the time. As the church proclaims, that is not the end of the story. God responds in the cross and resurrection of Christ where the principalities and powers are dismantled. New life, not death, has the last word. The church gathers to receive this life. It sings a new song and prays around word, font, and table. That leads to study, learning, pastoral care, and speaking together about the world’s needs so we can serve one another and the whole creation, especially the most vulnerable.

As the pandemic first took hold, we lived in the paradox of a forced Lenten period of fasting during a festival Easter season. During the intervening weeks and months, other paradoxes have become apparent.

- People in and out of the church are doing amazingly caring things for one another online and in person as necessary and possible. Our technological resources have been an immense help. Pastors and musicians are providing online readings, sermons, prayers, blessings, and music in ways facilitated by resources in their communities. At the same time, some seem poised to take advantage of our vulnerability. We need to be at once compassionate and wise.

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• Pastors and church musicians are among those doing the amazingly creative things together. At the same time, in addition to the economic and other hardships we all suffer, some church musicians are being treated badly. We need to give thanks for the amazing things that musicians are doing and simultaneously deal as compassionately as possible with those who are under duress caused directly or indirectly by the coronavirus.

• There is good in the midst of our travail. Some families are able to eat together. At the same time, the economic inequities of our social order are exposed along with domestic violence less easy to escape. We need to give thanks for the good but redouble our efforts to help the most vulnerable.

The pandemic has exacerbated the fabric of our common life already torn by lies, deceit, scapegoating, cruelty, hatred, and prejudice. Into this desert the church sends an oasis of sanity, truth, care for the neighbor, honesty, and compassion. So do other religious groups, agnostics, and atheists. We can and should all work together for the common good. To be sure, our actions do not always match and may sometimes even deny what we confess. That is why we confess our sins. God’s forgiveness gives us strength to walk in the way of the Lord—over and over.

When we return to the feasting of our gatherings, in the midst of our rejoicing we are likely to discover things we have learned. Here is one of them: we should use our remarkable electronic resources with everything else as well as possible for the good of our neighbors, but we should not presume that the virtual and isolated can substitute for the actual and together. This time brims with paradoxes and contradictions that, now and for many seasons to come, will require our compassion, wisdom, empathy, and care.

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Note
1. Augustine, Confessions, I.1.