

THOSE OTHER PEOPLE
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In the course of one week earlier this month, I read three newspaper reflections, a magazine article and heard two stories on the radio dealing with the rage that vaccinated people are feeling toward those who have chosen to skip the shots. Columnist Paul Krugman calls it the “rage of the responsible.”¹ Here is my confession—I was greatly relieved to learn that I was not alone in my feelings of frustration. I know that there are some people who are unable to be vaccinated because of health concerns or religious convictions or difficulty in getting to a vaccination site or doing so when the site is open, but that doesn’t account for the thousands who have simply made a choice different than mine. I rant at legislators and governors who have passed and are enforcing laws forbidding school superintendents and mayors from mandating the wearing of masks. I shake my fist at those, who have politicized masks and inoculations. I wish for vaccination mandates and, once in awhile, even think about punishment for the unvaccinated, such as increased insurance rates. I confess that I have fallen into that dark place of separating my self-righteous self from “those other people.” I acknowledge that I need to take a moment to breathe and receive a moment of grace.

So I try to listen to what Jesus has to say to me and maybe to you, too. In the reading from Mark’s gospel, we may think that Jesus is actually taking the side of the anti-vaxers in his interaction with some Pharisees and scribes. After a year and a half of reminders to wear our masks, keep distanced and wash our hands, the Pharisees sound like they are on the side of the angels when they complain about Jesus’ disciples not washing up before eating. Between using hand sanitizers every time we enter or leave a store and washing our hands a dozen times a day, it may feel like our skin is ready to fall off. We know about the importance of washing our hands, so what is going on that gets Jesus so riled up? What is his objection to a little good hygiene?

First, we have to acknowledge that Jesus is not against cleanliness. What he is against is that the Pharisees used their hand-washing rules to set them apart from folks who didn’t follow those rules. The Pharisees’ complaint was not that the disciples ate with dirty hands, but that they were acting like vulgar, common people; they were acting like Gentiles, those other people who were not Jews. The Pharisees, who were teachers of the law, were deeply concerned about maintaining their Jewish identity in a world that was satisfied with people worshipping a whole panoply of gods or not worshipping at all, as long they paid proper allegiance to Caesar. Handwashing was a boundary marker, a practice that set Jews apart from the rest of the world. It was part of the tradition that gave Jews identity and stability through long years of instability and attacks on their identity.

Now we need to pause a moment here and give the Pharisees their due. Pharisees are easy and frequent targets for us Christians, but in their time they were respected as

those who walked the walk as well as talked the talk. They were concerned with maintaining the Sabbath and correct understanding of the Torah. They worked to preserve tradition. In these ways we have much in common with them. Although this past year has forced us to rethink tradition, even on Zoom we followed the same order of worship, we continued the tradition of celebrating communion once a month, we figured out ways to still have coffee hour fellowship and gather the offering. Tradition is important to us, not just because we are sentimental but because it helps to define us, to give us identity and purpose.

The problem that arose between Jesus and the Pharisees was that, for the Pharisees, tradition had become more important than God's own commands. They had gotten bogged down in the rules, the minutia of appearing to be followers of the Law. They had become so rigid about the maintenance of the rules that they seemed to have forgotten that the purpose of the Law was as a guide for loving God and loving neighbor. They were using what was a gracious gift to draw lines to keep people out.

Here is an example of good Presbyterians doing the same thing. I once visited a church that has been around since before the Revolutionary War. In its small museum, I noticed a collection of communion tokens. In its early days, that congregation wanted to protect the holiness of the Lord's Supper from the undeserving, so on Saturdays anyone wanted to partake were required to come to the church and be examined by the elders. Those found to be pure of heart were given a token that they could then turn in on Sunday and receive the bread and cup. Those found to be wanting were denied a token and barred from the table. What is meant to be a gift of grace, communion, was kept from those who may have most needed to receive that gift. It became a sign of who was in and who was out, who were the good folks and who were "those other people."

This was the problem that Jesus had with the Pharisees and their maintenance of the tradition. It ignored what was vital, which was God's Law of love. Did you notice that the list of sins that Jesus said come from an evil heart? They are acts or words that hurt or demean others, acts or words that treat others as "those other people," acts or words that are without love. In the chapters following this one, Jesus demonstrated what God's Law of love is like—he traveled to the other side of the tracks where no self-respecting Jewish believer would go and there he healed the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, he gave hearing to deaf man who was Greek, and, just as he did earlier at the Jewish picnic, he fed 4,000 in Gentile territory. Jesus didn't have a problem with tradition; he had a problem with it being used to keep people from God, with it being a barrier to grace. He was about the business of breaking open doors, pulling down walls, and welcoming people in. Jesus recognized that aching, lonely, needy people come in all nationalities and ethnic groups, all races and religions. In his new creation there are none who could be classified as "those other people;" there are only God's children.

Which brings me back to my need to take a breath and to claim whatever bit of grace God can offer me because "those other people," the ones that frustrate, even anger me are people whom Jesus loves and whom I am called to love, too.

May I tell you a story? A friend of mine recently was asked to serve as pulpit supply for a church in North Carolina. On her first Sunday, she posted a sign on the front door, which read, “Please wear a mask. Love your neighbor as yourself!” Three congregants walked out as a result and the husband of one of them stayed behind to tell my friend, that she was wrong, that if she watched Fox News she would know that the only way to stop the pandemic is to stop wearing masks. Now my friend is not being paid very much to lead worship. She is retired from a prestigious job with a good pension. She doesn’t need the job. Besides, she lives with her elderly mother and, while they are both vaccinated, she is very careful about protecting her mother from Covid. She could quit the job, and avoid the frustration and cold shoulders turned her way. But so far, she has stayed; she has preached the good news and has reached out to those who are sick and dying, she has comforted the grieving and prayed for all the church members, even the ones who walked out. And, if I know my friend, she will figure a way to listen to those who hate the masks and refuse the vaccine. She will try to encourage a community bound together in love, not divided by politics. I’ve seen her do it before.

So I pray for God’s help to soften my heart so that good things, holy things might come out—not anger, not frustration, not words that hurt and slander. I pray that I can direct my anger and frustration at systems of power that prioritize profit over wellness or at the inequalities of healthcare or at media that give out vaccine misinformation. I find myself challenged to keep asking, is what I am about to say, what I am about to do, grounded in love of neighbor, does it reflect God’s own word of mercy and renewal? I pray that God’s renewing grace may work on me from deep within so that I may be one who listens with patience and understanding, who tries to build bridges, who furthers the work of love, who has an open heart. I don’t know that this approach will heal any of the divisions that mark our world and our society these days. All I can do is pray that God will embolden and empower me to try. Will you join me?

ⁱ Paul Krugman, “The Quiet Rage of the Responsible,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2021, p. A19.