

'Being the Church' During the Pandemic

3/22/2020

Dear Teacher,

Today's lesson tells of churches no longer having gatherings for worship due to the new restrictions on crowd sizes while the struggle against the coronavirus goes on. Many churches have figured out accommodations, technological and otherwise, to still "be the church" while suspending worship assemblies. Thus, how to *be the church* during the pandemic will be the topic of this installment of *The Wired Word*.

NOTE: During this time of physical separation forced on us all by efforts to control the spread of the virus, we will be presenting the weekly installments of *The Wired Word* in a way we think will help if your class is meeting in cyberspace rather than face to face: We will include in the TWW student version the full lesson, with all the biblical commentary and additional discussion suggestions normally available only in the teacher's version. That way, every class member will have all the material, so that you as the teacher won't have to use online time to fill them in on how the Bible verses apply to the lesson topic.

If you'd prefer a different topic, look at our second lesson, which begins with news about a Muslim candidate for public office who responded to the attacks of a critic in an unexpected way. We explore how compassion can transform relationships characterized by hostility to peaceable friendships. (*We have deliberately chosen to base this lesson on news that has nothing to do with coronavirus, so you'll have a lesson option if you're feeling overloaded by news about the disease.*)

You are welcome to email the student version of either lesson to your class members, depending on which lesson you prefer to use for your class. To do so, click here (<http://www.thewiredword.com/subscriber/studentlist.aspx>).

May God bless you as you teach the scriptures this week.

The Editorial Team of *The Wired Word*



'Being the Church' During the Pandemic

The Wired Word for the Week of March 22, 2020

In the News

When we at *The Wired Word* started talking about possible topics for this week's lesson, there was no question that even though we've already provided two lessons related to the coronavirus crisis (the first lesson for the February 16 TWW installment and the second lesson for the March 8 installment), that we needed to address it again this week.

So we decided to write about how churches are responding to the efforts to slow the spread of the disease. That decision was made just three days before writing this lesson (on Tuesday).

But what we didn't realize at the time was how fast some of what churches decided to do would need to be revised as the governments of our states and our nation issued new guidelines and imposed new restrictions that had seemed almost unthinkable just days earlier.

What happened in the Episcopal Diocese of Albany (New York) is an example of how fast decisions about how the church should respond have had to be rethought. In an email message sent on March 13, Bishop William H. Love, the diocesan leader, informed the clergy and laypeople of the diocese that while "a few" other dioceses

had decided to cancel all their Sunday services, he had chosen not to do that, at least not yet.

Instead, he issued instructions to minimize person-to-person contact during worship services. One concerned changes in how communion should be served. "The wine consecrated at Holy Communion will be consumed by the celebrant only," the bishop said, rather than by each worshiper from a common cup, which is standard Episcopal practice.

Communion was to be administered from the aisle, not the altar rail "to do away with the need for multiple people touching the altar rail one after another while kneeling side by side," the bishop said.

But just four days later, Bishop Love sent a second email message, stating that due to new guidelines from President Trump to avoid gatherings of 10 or more people, he was suspending all regular Sunday and weekday services through the end of March.

That suspension is to apply even to funerals, which are to be limited in attendance to immediate family members. The bishop recommended that a larger memorial service honoring the life of the departed member be scheduled once the suspension is lifted.

It seems likely that given the guidelines from the White House, many other churches, as well as houses of worship from other religions, will make similar decisions before this Sunday or the day they would normally gather for worship.

Part of the difficulty is that the guidelines for minimizing the health risk from the coronavirus continue to evolve. Pastor Linda Stephan of Williamston United Methodist Church in Williamston, Michigan, recently proposed a hybrid service where healthy members could attend in person, and others could attend via a livestream.

But already that plan has been scuttled. She has now arranged to stream her sermon on Facebook Live. Stephan is certain that for a church, "gathering matters," but she understands that these are not ordinary times.

She also sees the importance of her role as a faith leader in this crisis, which is unprecedented in lifetimes of people today.

"I am also grateful that I'm in the place that I'm at, and hopefully [will] be a calming presence to my people and also a bold leader, and to make some good decisions, not just for my church community, but for everyone," Stephan said.

Lest we increase fear, we should also report some "good news" about the disease itself. The first epidemiological studies are beginning to be published. One study preprint (see the "Estimating the Infection and Case Fatality ..." link in the list below) was of the cruise ship *Diamond Princess*, where over 3,700 passengers and crew were exposed to the coronavirus in Hong Kong prior to sailing to Yokohama. During most of the voyage, things proceeded with normal social interactions in a confined space. There was no isolation (confining a diseased person) or quarantine (restricting those known to be exposed).

Once in Japan, the ship was quarantined for 14 days and approximately 3,100 of those on board were tested for the virus. Although conditions were favorable for the spread of the disease prior to knowledge of it onboard, only 17 percent tested positive -- and over half of those showed no symptoms. Seven people died, six of the 1,015 passengers aged 70-79 and one of the 216 aged 80-89. Although this is a small sample, this indicates that the quarantine and restrictions currently in effect are likely to greatly reduce the spread of the disease and, as

long as the rates remain low and medical facilities are not overwhelmed, almost everyone who contracts the disease will survive. As some people have noted, we should be concerned and careful, but not fearful or hysterical.

The calming-presence role for religious leaders that Stephan mentioned cannot be overstated. Nor should their role as Bible teachers and Christian theologians. The Bible and Christian theology provide a solid rock on which to stand during difficult times.

God is with us.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Faith Leaders Talk About Guiding Congregants Through COVID-19 and Uncertain Times. *Michigan Radio* (<https://www.michiganradio.org/post/faith-leaders-talk-about-guiding-congregants-through-covid-19-and-uncertain-times>) Should Your Church Stop Meeting to Slow COVID-19? How 3 Seattle Churches Decided. *Christianity Today* (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/seattle-churches-stop-meeting-to-slow-covid-19-coronavirus.html>)

Estimating the Infection and Case Fatality Ratio For COVID-19 Using Age-Adjusted Data From the Outbreak on the Diamond Princess Cruise Ship. *medRxiv* (<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.03.05.20031773v2.full.pdf>)

The Big Questions

1. What measures, if any, have you personally taken to protect yourself and your family during this pandemic? If there are recommended measures you've chosen not to take, why?
2. What are some possible good side effects that might come from temporary "social distancing"? How might temporary social distancing contribute to your spiritual life?
3. Does gathering actually matter to the church? Explain your answer. What might enforced forgoing of gathering together teach the church?
4. In what ways, if at all, do scripture and Christian theology help you deal with uncertain times?
5. What is the opposite of "uncertain times"? (Answer this question in the context of your appointment calendar.)

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

James 4:13-15

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." (No context needed.)

"Uncertain times."

We're starting to hear that term a lot these days when no one can accurately predict how long our world will be dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

In a way, "uncertain times" is an odd term, since in reality all times are uncertain, as James reminds us in the verses above.

Questions: What role ought planning for the future have in a Christian's approach to life? What or who might be overlooked because of future planning? What or who that might have been overlooked be included because of future planning? How do your appointment calendar and happenstance intersect? How do your appointment calendar and God's will intersect?

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (For context, read 10:23-25.)

Perhaps one of the reasons "social distancing" is a challenge for churches (and for many others) is that it makes the act of "encouraging one another" more difficult. Of course, even from a distance, we can send email and Facebook messages and texts, as well as make phone calls of encouragement (or of friendship or of support, etc.). But there is something that being physically present with others for whom faith in Christ is important is not so easily replaced from a distance.

What's more, the Bible often represents people in forced social isolation as "cut off" from the temple or family or fellowship (see, for example, Leviticus 13:45-46; Psalm 38:11; Numbers 12:10-15; Luke 17:12). On the other hand, one way salvation is sometimes characterized is as God or Jesus bridging the distance to those in social isolation (see Jeremiah 23:23; Luke 15:20; 17:12-14; 18:13-14; Ephesians 2:13).

This week, the United Methodist bishop of New Jersey listed these reasons why churches ought to willingly accept not gathering during the current crisis:

- We want to take every means possible to protect people's health and stop the spread of the coronavirus. The sooner we all work together to stamp out the virus, the sooner life gets back to normal.
- Governmental officials, including the president, have said there are not to be gatherings of 10 or more people.
- While your town may not be affected yet, we want to be in solidarity with our sister congregations that are in affected areas.
- We want to be a witness and example of what are appropriate behaviors and practices during a pandemic.
- For all of those who are sick or who have died, we want to honor them through our actions.
- The number of reported cases in the United States grew by over 25 percent overnight. This is a serious health pandemic, and the church should be part of the solution.

Questions: What do you feel you are missing by not gathering with your fellow Christians at church right now? How is God speaking to you right now, and what is he saying?

Psalm 91:4-6 (NIV)

*[God] will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,*

*nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

(For context, read 91:1-16.)

Psalm 91 is about trust and confidence in God. It speaks of unqualified protection for the righteous, which is probably why it is popular among those engaged in perilous undertakings, including those going onto battlefields.

Note here what the psalm says about "the pestilence that stalks in the darkness," and "the plague that destroys at midday."

Questions: It's likely that with a disease this widespread, at least some of those who have died were followers of Jesus. In what ways should Christians hear these lines about pestilence and plague today?

Psalm 46:1-2

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea ... (For context, read 46:1-11.)

Hebrews 12:28

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe ... (For context, read 12:25-29.)

A lot more than the metaphorical mountains of Psalm 46 has been shaken up by the global pandemic we are facing. We have experienced a shaking that is felt into our very roots. The assumption that plagues and the like only happen in countries lacking in up-to-date sanitary controls and the latest in medical services has been jolted out of us. Confidence in world, national and state health services has crumbled. Gone are the days when all we had to fear was fear itself. We are being shaken to the core.

We now know this: No human defense is certain, and no human life can be guaranteed by any agency of earth. Only God is unshakeable and the only unshakeable place is the kingdom of God itself. The writer of Hebrews says as much: "Therefore ... we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken."

But the problem is, while we who are people of faith can assent to that on a "spiritual" level, in the nitty-gritty of our lives -- that place where we reside most of the time -- that affirmation doesn't connect very well. Yes, we who follow Christ are citizens of both an eternal kingdom and an earthly nation, but what, in any terms that help us now, does that dual citizenship really mean?

The people of the Old Testament had to struggle to understand that as well, and one place we see it is in Psalm 46. The psalm sings about the city of God (Jerusalem) as though it were absolutely untouchable: "though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. ... God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved" (vv 2-3, 5).

However, Jerusalem did eventually fall, specifically to the army of the Babylonians.

What the people of ancient Jerusalem missed is that while God was in the midst of the city, he called them to trust not a place but a Presence.

The true city of God is within us, and our ultimate confidence is in the holy Presence in that "place."

Questions: What inside you feels "shaken" by the global pandemic? What inside you feels "solid" despite the global pandemic? In what ways *for you* is God "a very present help in trouble"? What, if anything, keeps you from affirming that?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to these quotes from a blog entry titled "10 Guidelines for Pastoral Care During the Coronavirus Outbreak" (<https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/guest-post/10-guidelines-pastoral-care-during-coronavirus-outbreak>) by Eileen R. Campbell-Reed. Though written for pastors, its advice can apply to the church as a whole, so in your response, mention how you personally might put these ideas to work in your congregation:

- Show up for people, even if it's not in person. "Avoid close contact" is becoming a mantra in this crisis, especially for people over 60. Some groups of people will experience social stigma around the disease. In this age, we can show up for people digitally. It is not the same as being able to reach out and hold a hand. Yet we are fortunate to have this viable option. You are likely already connected to people on various social platforms, so use them -- with care -- to offer your support.
- Listen in love. No matter what turn a crisis takes, one of the most enduring and powerful gifts we can offer is to listen. By listening we embody the love of the sacred, the love of a wider community, the love of life itself. Compassionate listening is exactly what people need when they are faced with the overwhelming, uncontrollable circumstances of a crisis.
- Keep values alive. Hospice workers and chaplains often say that people die the way they lived. And while not every crisis will be a deadly one, we are all going to die. In frightening times, our job is to call on people to live into their best sense of how to be in the world. This does not mean being dishonest about a crisis and its threats. It does mean we keep leaning into God's sustaining presence, loving our neighbors, and facing death with the same purpose and values by which we faced life.

2. Read this, from TWW team consultant James Gruetzner: A few years ago, our moderate-sized (Sunday attendance about 200) congregation began to webcast one of its Sunday morning services. Although we had continued services [during the initial responses to the coronavirus] -- advising people to worship via the Internet if they were older or symptomatic, and taking precautions to avoid interpersonal spread of pathogens, Tuesday evening, following the president's recommendation to limit gatherings to 10 people, we decided to go to webcast-only for our Lenten (Wednesday night) and Sunday morning services. (Services are both live-streamed and available for later use.) We are arranging to have ten people total (including pastor) to provide for hymn singing and liturgy responses. We'll see how this works out. See [Christ Lutheran Church and School, Sermons & Worship Services](https://christabq.org/worship/#sermons) (<https://christabq.org/worship/#sermons>).

It will be a challenge to make payroll. During the offering time we will not only show how to give electronically (which our family had been doing for over a decade), we will encourage people who are members of other congregations to continue their regular donations to their own.

3. Comment on this: One thing James Gruetzner noticed while people were still attending services during the early responses to the virus spread: "Despite encouragement from our pastor for people to maintain their 'anti-social distance' (terminology popular at work, not used by him), people seemed to prefer to sit close to each other anyway."

4. Respond to this article about an outcome from the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 (<http://www.brethren.org/messenger/articles/2020/brethren-and-1918-influenza.html>), written by TWW team member Frank Ramirez.

Responding to the News

Check out "Coronavirus Resources for the Church." (<https://www.wheaton.edu/academics/academic-centers/humanitarian-disaster-institute/covid-19/>) (Our thanks to TWW subscriber Craig Schmidt, pastor of Bethel Lutheran Brethren Church in Antler, North Dakota, for pointing us to this resource.)

Review these "7 Lessons from Singapore's Churches for When the Coronavirus Reaches Yours" (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/7-lessons-covid-19-coronavirus-churches-singapore-us-europe.html>) and consider which ones you can apply to your church.

Learn from the excellent advice here (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/seattle-churches-stop-meeting-to-slow-covid-19-coronavirus.html>) from a man who worked for the World Health Organization during the SARS epidemic in China.

Familiarize yourself with the advice from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html>) regarding how to protect yourself from the coronavirus.

See what you can do to relieve your worries while still protecting yourself and your family: Don't Go Down a Coronavirus Anxiety Spiral (<https://www.wired.com/story/how-to-stop-coronavirus-anxiety-spiral/>).

Be inspired by viewing this: "We Are Not Alone" by Pepper Choplin at Sandy Ridge Mennonite (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OviilwuJVtE&fbclid=IwAR1eqHGgY1BRuK9yHmMRa3X3_sm9PYHPSsM7Unp7ZoAHjIhsAJYBnhm_0Yk) or this: We Are Not Alone (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiIE9iikIZk>).

Prayer

Strengthen, O Lord, all who are on the medical front lines against the coronavirus. Enable those in authority to make good and timely decisions about matters related to the virus. Help us all to do what we can to slow the spread of the disease. Empower the church to "be the church" in creative, calm, compassionate ways. And bring this pandemic to a swift end so that lives are spared. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Compassionate Response to Bigoted Comments Leads to Unexpected Friendship

The Wired Word for the Week of March 22, 2020

In the News

A month ago, neither Qasim Rashid nor Oz Dillon could have predicted that they would become friends. Most people would have seen them as polar opposites.

Democrat Qasim Rashid, an attorney and Muslim immigrant from Pakistan, is running for Congress in Virginia's 1st District, which has been represented by a Republican since 1977. If he wins, one of his constituents would be Oz Dillon, 66, of Fredericksburg, Virginia, a conservative who had posted a number of

hate-filled messages about Rashid and his faith on social media.

"We do not need you[r] ilk in our nation. Let alone in any seat of office above street sweeper," Dillon wrote. "I didn't believe there was a place for [Muslims] in our government," said Dillon.

In early March, Rashid tweeted that, while he had been deeply hurt by Dillon's anti-Muslim tweets, he had discovered that Dillon was struggling with crippling medical bills after his wife Terri suffered a pulmonary embolism. So Rashid announced that he was making a donation to Dillon's GoFundMe account.

"I donated because my faith teaches me to serve all humanity, whether they be Christian, Jewish, atheist, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu -- whomever. Healthcare is a human right and I hope and pray for nothing but healing for this family," Rashid wrote. Then he encouraged his 400,000 followers to do the same if they could.

And give they did. As of March 17, the fundraiser had raised \$22,635 of a goal of \$26,237 from 679 givers, many of whom cited Rashid's example as the reason for their contributions.

"And my mind was just a whirlwind, a tornado of -- what the heck have I done?" Dillon said. Rashid had "reached across that gap [between us] and took my hand," he added.

"You humble me sir, with your graciousness, and surprisingly kind words," Dillon wrote to Rashid. "Given how I have misspoken about you in posts on Facebook, I am truly shocked, that you have shared my wife and my plight with your supporters. I must now reassess my opinion about you, and your platform, come November."

"He asked for forgiveness," Rashid said, to which he replied, "There's nothing to forgive. You're my brother in humanity."

Dillon asked Rashid to come for a visit. On March 8, the two met in person for the first time.

"Today I met my new friend Oz 🤝 #WinTheHearts
I look forward to the beginning of a wonderful friendship." Rashid tweeted.

"The first thing I said to [Dillon when we met] was, 'I'm not doing this for any favor,'" Rashid emphasized. "And [Dillon] responded, 'That's fine, but I need you to put your yard signs for your campaign in my lawn so everyone can see it.'" But whether or not Rashid would earn Dillon's vote was "not what it's all about," Rashid insisted.

Dillon expressed gratitude for everything he had already learned from Rashid.

"An amazing week of eye & heart opening enlightenment, that I used to always have before 9/11," he wrote online. "A Christian Muslim, Qasim Rashid, who I had previously opposed politically just because of the word Muslim, has opened my eyes that there are GOOD people in all walks of life."

One person who donated to eliminate Dillon's debt, Satish Wasti, stated: "Qasim Rashid's tweet brought me here [to Dillon's GoFundMe page]. We all have something to learn from Rashid's kindness and Oz's moral courage and his ability for self-criticism. Thanks to both Rashid and Oz for showing us that love and compassion can prevail."

More on this story can be found at these links:

A Man Sent a Hateful Message to a Muslim Candidate. He Responded With a Call For Help. *CBS News* (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/a-man-sent-a-hateful-message-to-a-muslim-candidate-he-responded-with-a-call-to-help/>)

Unlikely Friendship After Political Candidate Helps Pay Medical Debt of Man Who Sent Racist Tweets.

FOX43.com (<https://www.fox43.com/article/syndication/heartthreads/unlikely-friendship-after-political-candidate-helps-pay-medical-debt-of-man-who-sent-racist-tweets/521-bb791932-fa6c-4938-a06d-8974bb833f98>)

Politician Helps Pay Off Medical Debt for Man Who Sent Him Racist Tweets -- And They're Now Friends.

Good News Network (<https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/politician-helps-pay-medical-debt-for-man-who-sent-racist-tweets/>)

Mission Accomplished! Many Prayers to You All. *GoFundMe* (<https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-relieve-crushing-medical-debt>)

The Big Questions

1. How do you think Rashid's efforts to get better acquainted with Dillon affected the way their interaction played out?
2. Why do you think Dillon described Rashid as "a Christian Muslim"? What do you think he meant?
3. When, if ever, have you been on the receiving end of compassion from a person or persons you had treated poorly? How did that compassion impact you?
4. How can you show compassion to people with prickly personalities or hostile behavior that make them hard to love?
5. What lessons have you learned from enemies? Can you thank God for those lessons, even if you are not grateful for the hardships you went through while you were learning them?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 6:27-28, 35-36

[Jesus said,] "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ... But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (For context, read 6:20-36.)

Maybe you don't think you have any enemies, so this passage doesn't really apply to you. The word "enemy" comes from the Latin word *inimicus*, from the prefix *in-*, or "not," and *amicus*, "friend"; so an enemy is someone who is "not a friend" or someone who is unfriendly or hostile to you, or someone to whom you are unfriendly or hostile.

Jesus sets a high bar for his disciples. While most people endeavor to love their friends and do good to those they feel close to, that is not enough for Jesus.

If you love people who love you back, is that such a great accomplishment? He wants to know. If you do good things for people who do good things for you, is that something for which you should be rewarded? If you lend money only to people who can afford to pay you back with interest, why do you think that is such a big deal (vv. 32-34)?

No, it is an accomplishment when you love your enemies who don't love you back and do good to those who hate you, when you bless those who curse you and pray God's blessing on those who abuse you, when you lend to those who can't pay you back (see also Luke 14:12-14).

When you live that way, you will receive a great reward (v. 35).

Questions: Who are your enemies (people who are unfriendly toward you, or people to whom you are not particularly friendly)? What would it take for you to become friendly to one person or group who qualifies as an enemy, by this definition? What would you need to do to become a real friend to such a person or group?

What is the nature of the great reward people who follow Jesus' instructions will receive?

1 Corinthians 4:11-14, 16

To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day. I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ... I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. (For context, read 4:11-17.)

In this letter, Paul urged the Corinthians to accept his guidance and follow his example, because he loved them as their spiritual father, the one who brought them the good news of Christ (vv. 14-15).

For the sake of Christ and the gospel, Paul said, he and his coworkers suffered hunger, thirst, privation, abuse, homelessness, exhaustion from overwork, insults, curses, persecution, slander and condemnation. They were treated like garbage. And such treatment was not all in the past. They were experiencing it "to the present hour" (v. 11), he said; it was still happening.

And how did they react to all this adversity and mistreatment? They blessed those who reviled them. They endured persecution. They spoke kindly to those who bore false witness against them and slandered their good name.

Paul wasn't wishing that the Corinthians would experience all the adversity and opposition he had endured, but when they encountered such hardship, he wanted them to copy the way he and his coworkers reacted to such things. He wanted them to bless when they were cursed, to endure mistreatment with the grace of Jesus, and to return kind words for untrue and damaging mischaracterizations of who they were.

Questions: When, if ever, have you been the target of bullies, slanderers, mockers or unrelenting critics who could never find a good word to say about you? How did you react?

Who, if anyone, do you consider your spiritual father, mother or role model(s)? What aspects of their character and way of living would you want to emulate when you are being treated unfairly? How might recalling Paul's example, and the example of your personal spiritual role model(s), help you respond to curses with blessing, to persecution with perseverance, and to slander with kindness?

Matthew 14:29-33

[Jesus] said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (For context, read 14:22-33.)

Jesus sent the disciples out to sea while he dismissed the crowds who had come to hear him preach, and then went up the mountain by himself to pray (vv. 22-23). During the night, a storm arose, and the disciples' boat was battered by the wind and the waves (v. 24). Early in the morning, Jesus walked on the sea toward the boat, which terrified the disciples, who thought he was a ghost (vv. 25-26). Jesus reassured them that it was he himself, exhorting them not to be afraid (v. 27).

Then Peter got the bright idea of testing the waters (literally), and asked Jesus to command him to come to him on the water (v. 28). When he heard the command to come, Peter obeyed.

Everything was fine until Peter woke up to the absurdity of what he was doing, panicked, and began to sink, crying out for Jesus to save him.

On Oz Dillon's GoFundMe page is a painting entitled *The Hand of God*, by Yongsung Kim (<https://havenlight.com/collections/yongsung-kim/products/the-hand-of-god-by-yongsung-kim?variant=31454692343901>). In the painting, Jesus extends his arm to pull Peter, who was sinking under the waves of the sea, out of the water. Next to the image is this verse: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2, KJV).

Why, we wonder, did Dillon choose this particular painting and verse for his GoFundMe appeal? At the very least, it seems to suggest that Dillon has a strong affinity for the Christian message. Galatians 6:2 may have been included simply as an expression of Dillon's hope that Christians who saw his appeal would help him by picking up some of the debt that was such a crushing burden on him and his wife.

Dillon may have chosen the painting because he felt he was in danger of drowning (like Peter), and he knew he needed rescuing from financial disaster that only Jesus could provide. How ironic, then, that Dillon should be rescued by over 600 people from all walks of life and different faiths and no faith!

As one donor, only identified by the initials R.D., wrote, "Love and compassion have no boundary." Sheila Dettloff, another giver, echoed the sentiment: "No religion has a monopoly on kindness."

Perhaps Dillon recognized that he needed to be rescued from his bigotry even more than he needed salvation from financial disaster. What surprised him was that the heroes in his own story turned out to be an array of people, beginning with Rashid, that he did not expect to be the heroes. One donor, Kristy Stubbs, picked up on that idea when she likened Rashid to the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). As another contributor, Darcie D, asserted, "I'm a Christian, and the Muslims I've met truly are some of the most Christlike people I have ever known."

Questions: When, if ever, have you been surprised to see someone who does not identify as a Christian behave in a decidedly Christlike manner? How do you make sense of that experience? How might that broaden your appreciation for the ways God works in people and in the world?

When have you felt like Peter, in danger of sinking in deep water? What do you fear today? From what do you need to be rescued? Are you ready to take the hand of Jesus, no matter who is on the other end of that hand?

Psalm 145:7-9, 14

*They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.
The LORD is gracious and merciful,*

*slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made. ...
The LORD upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down. (For context, read 145:4-14.)*

The psalmist praises God's might and power, majesty and wondrous works, which one generation exalts to another.

Questions: Do you think it is the older generation who celebrates God's greatness to the younger generation, or the other way around? Explain.

Share about a time you experienced God's grace, mercy, steadfast love, goodness and compassion, when you thought you might be the object of God's anger instead. How might such an experience of God's compassion on you empower you to show compassion to someone you know who might not deserve it?

How can you allow God to use your arms to uphold someone who is falling? How can you allow God to use your compassion to raise up someone who is bowed down?

For Further Discussion

1. Have you ever felt frustrated about a relationship that seems to be characterized by a failure to communicate and understand one another? Maybe it felt like you were beating your head against a brick wall, which is a metaphor that expresses the idea of wasting one's time trying hard to accomplish something that is completely hopeless.

How would you apply these two following quotations to the problem of hostility from an enemy?

"Don't spend time beating on a wall hoping it will transform into a door." - French fashion designer, Gabrielle Bonheur "Coco" Chanel

"If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it." - Michael Jordan, retired NBA professional basketball champion with the Chicago Bulls

2. Reflect on this, from *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, by Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison:

"The word *compassion* is derived from the Latin words *pati* and *cum*, which together mean 'to suffer with.' Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless."

How did Rashid show compassion to Dillon?

In one of Rashid's comments about Dillon, he called Dillon's apology compassionate. How was it possible that Dillon, who had shown little compassion for Rashid before, could be completely transformed and empathetic toward a man he had previously viewed as his enemy?

3. Here's a sample of comments from those who donated to Dillon's fundraiser because they were inspired by Rashid's compassionate generosity and by Dillon's change of heart. How do these givers appear to differ from one another? What values do these donors seem to share in common, if any?

- Kindness is the only cure to the virus of negativity that has infected our society. Hard as it is. You can argue with someone until you are both blue in the face and you will NOT change their mind. You must change their heart. ... Our problems are the enemy, not each other! Train your fire at the problem, not your neighbor. Then we have two people working on the solution instead of two people trying to destroy each other. --John Deboer
- Please know that our Muslim brothers are with us. Let's fight for each other. --Steve Johnson
- In support of humanity and building bridges. --James Ballard
- I am an atheist, and regardless of our beliefs, Islam, Christian, Hindu or none, we should all strive for a more equitable and supportive society. --George Riedel
- I am also from a Muslim family but none of this should matter if someone is in need. --Feda Mekan
- I was moved to act after hearing about Qasim Rashid's generous donation. My father could barely afford to miss work after his bypass operation. It is not 'progressive' to believe that the sick should be cared for and not laden with debt. Jesus commanded his disciples to heal the sick, and reminded them "freely you have received, freely give." --Wanjun Chen
- Encouraged by your sincere change of heart. We are all part of the same family. Our differences are a grain of sand --Martha Dille
- From an old-school Jewish lefty, on behalf of my Muslim brother Qasim Rashid, may you and your wife be well. I hope we all live to see a world where no one has to go through this --Jenny Schlieps
- I donated because Qasim Rashid, who is a good man and observant Muslim, encouraged people to help. I hope that you will in return encourage your friends and family to accept people of other faiths, ethnicities and political stripes to heal the world. --Gordon Laatz
- ... As humans we always must come to the aid of others. If we don't all of humanity will be lost. ... Consider this a donation from the Creator. - A Muslim friend from the other side. --Mustafa Muslim

4. How are these three sayings seen in Dillon's and Rashid's approach to their differences?

It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. --Chinese proverb

All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle. --Source unknown

Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light. --J.K.

Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

5. What bearing do these statements have on our responsibility as Christians to get to know people rather than judging them on first impressions or appearances?

All of our humanity is dependent on recognizing the humanity in others. --Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize recipient

I don't like that man. I must get to know him better. --Abraham Lincoln

I've lived long enough -- Stonehenge and me -- that I've learned even when folks do spiteful things, they have a reason. Often when I know the reason, their actions make sense. It doesn't make them right, but it does make sense; and when I understand, I tend to be less critical and more compassionate. --Patsy Clairmont, *Chasing Fireflies*

Responding to the News

"Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" attributed to Abraham Lincoln

Think about a person or group you have been less than friendly with. Ask God to give you a creative idea about how you might grow in your understanding and compassion and be a true friend to that person or group. Resolve to act on that idea and begin at once!

Prayer suggested by Romans 15:13

O God of hope, fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Help us to see adversaries through your eyes. Reveal to us the lessons you have ordained for us to learn, that we may grow in humility, empathy, compassion and love. And may your joy be our strength. Amen.

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