

I had a sermon all planned out and written for today. It was about this story from Acts 1 and the decision on the part of the disciples to replace Judas. What an incredible story about grace and moving forward in spite of a terrible chapter in your story. I wrote that sermon out mostly on Friday, and in a moment, I'll share some of it with you. But while I was writing that sermon out, something happened. The Center for Disease Control updated their COVID-19 precautions to say that vaccinated individuals no longer need to wear masks or practice social distancing. Those who have been shot in the arm once or twice with the modern marvel of medicine can now move about their world freely again.

No matter your opinion on vaccinations, it's a gift to be able to go to the party again, to be able to visit grandma in the nursing home again, to be able to move up and down the grocery store aisles without those little arrows telling us we're going the wrong way again, and most of all, to see the number of hospitalizations and deaths going down across our country. It's a gift, and we owe our thanks to all who have worked so hard, from the researchers, to the doctors, to the nurses, to the volunteers who learned how to give someone a shot so more people could get vaccinated more quickly. And yet, there are at least two realities that remain unchanged, and is these that I would like to talk with you about this morning.

But even before I do that, I want to acknowledge that we as a church have no official position on vaccinations. Our leadership has discussed whether we ought to. When the COVID-19 vaccinations first became available, our Deacons and Council met immediately to talk about it. Should we or should we not encourage people right out loud from the pulpit to get vaccinated? It's no secret that public sentiment around vaccinations tend to move along geographic lines, and we live in a state where the great majority of people would not think to not get vaccinated. So it's not like we'd be risking much to take a position on vaccines in support of public health. And yet, I have to believe there are certain things you don't come to church to hear about. As my friend, Jane, said to me just yesterday when she

asked what I was preaching on today, and I told her I had changed up my sermon to touch on the new CDC guidelines and what they could mean for us as a church community, she said, “What was your first sermon going to be about?”

I’m not saying this is the case for everyone everywhere. Some people go to church with every question, looking for every answer. I’m just saying it’s a pretty dependable case here that you don’t, and the way I know this is because, just as none of you ever come asking me how you should vote, none of you have come asking me whether you should or should not get vaccinated.

It is one of the particular credos of this church, and of your pastor, that we trust each other without always knowing how or why. It’s why, you may have noticed, I leave a lot of thoughts unfinished in my sermons each week. I trust that you, my listener, can finish them. I trust that within this beloved community, we have grace enough to not force each other to all go one way together, while also having love enough to know when we all need to go one way together.

You have to know, though, that doing it this way means it’s going to get messy around here at times. We are not always going to agree. At times, we’ll even be divided. Jesus himself warned his disciples in Matthew’s gospel, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother.”¹ Fighting words for a man who never actually picked up a sword. In Luke’s gospel, he put it this way. “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own.”² His point was, I think: do you have anything going in your life for which you’d be willing to skip your own mother’s funeral? In the words of Wendell Berry, are you doing anything that won’t compute?³ Anything that can be measured only by the foolishness of love? Anything that is costing you your life but gaining you your soul?

¹ 10:34

² 9:60

³ From his poem, “*Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*,” 1991.

Which brings us back to the two realities that remain unchanged today even in the face of new guidelines for the vaccinated. The first reality is that whole corners of our planet are still suffering greatly under the weight of sickness and disease. These are corners where every day medicines, let alone vaccines, are still not available. Where medical insurance is not even a luxury, but an unknown. Where hospital infrastructures are collapsing because communities where the poverty rate is above 50% cannot support hospitals. And yet, the poor too get sick, just like the rich. The poor too must breathe, just like the rich. The poor too are worthy of life, and of dignity, and of hope. As people of faith, who learned as children to put to memory that *God so loves the world*, we cannot accept a world of such gross inequity and injustice.

I do not mean to steal our joy for the world we get to live in. Please understand this much, whatever authority you think I have to make you wear a mask, even when you come to church, or to tell you where to sit, I don't. As your pastor, my only authority is to carry some light and walk beside you, to try and illuminate for you the possibilities that exist right where you are because of who you are as gifted, daring, foolishly-loving people. My only authority is to tell you over and over again that God's story is your story—this story about a God who sets captives free, opens the eyes of the blind, touches the wounded, dies on a cross as an enemy to power and a friend to the poor, and then rises from the grave to show that nothing! nothing! is greater than love—this story is your story and God welcomes you to step into it anytime you like, that you might discover the joy God finds in you.

Among my favorite poets is the Persian poet Hafiz, who, writing from the perspective of God, says,

Someone put
You on a slave block
And the unreal bought
You.

Now I keep coming to your owner
Saying,

“This one is mine.”

You often overhear us talking
And this can make your heart leap
With excitement.

Don't worry.
I will not let sadness
Possess you.

I will gladly borrow all the gold
I need

To get you
Back.⁴

This is first reality: too much of our world still stands on the slave block. Too many brothers and sisters can't get any daily bread, don't have medicine, are being exploited and oppressed by the powers of privilege and prejudice, and the only authority I have is to tell you with all joy that you belong to God. And with this joy you should do something, you should go buy up the whole world.

The second reality I want to talk with you about this morning is this one, the one we are sitting in together right now. This coming Tuesday, the state of Rhode Island has announced that it will change its COVID-19 precautions to match those of the CDC, and thus allow vaccinated individuals to move about freely without masks or social distancing. Already, many of you have asked what this will mean for us going forward on Sunday mornings. Can those who are vaccinated stop wearing masks at church? Why are we wearing masks even now? Most of us are probably vaccinated, we're spaced out, and we're outdoors. It's been a long 14 months, we've worked hard to not have to wear masks, must we wear them still?

⁴ *“This One Is Mine.”* Published in *“The Gift.”* Translations by Daniel Ladinsky (1999). P. 50.

Again, I don't have the kind of authority that can answer such questions. What I will say is that the new CDC guidelines fail to take into account the value of our children and all who still cannot be vaccinated because the vaccine won't work for them, or their body is already compromised in some other way. And while we may tell ourselves that our decision to not wear a mask doesn't put them at risk, because maybe we are now vaccinated, and so why should I still have to wear a mask? And...

Maybe I should have taken Jane's advice and just gone with the other sermon. Except I have a secret to tell you: this is not a sermon about vaccines. Nor is it a sermon about who is and is not really at risk still for catching COVID. It is not a sermon that intends to make an argument for or against wearing masks in church. It's not a sermon about coming to church at all. This is a sermon about the same thing most sermons are about: power, and grace, and what can happen when these two things meet. When those who have the power to walk about their world freely and fully choose with grace to walk in solidarity with those who cannot. Because there are plenty in our world who still cannot. There will always be some who cannot. Jesus knew it, and so did his disciples. One day they asked him, "Jesus, how long, how long must we go on like this until you restore the kingdom, put things back the way they were?" And Jesus tells them, "Let the little children come to me. Don't leave them standing out in the world all alone. Let them come to me."

"No, no Jesus, we want to know about that kingdom of ours."

So one day, when there's a great crowd gathered about to hear him preach, and everyone is going ooh and ah, Jesus pulls the disciples aside to say, "If you want to be first, be last. If you want to be great, be a servant."

"Yeah, yeah, we get all that. Now how about that kingdom?"

So finally, finally, finally, Jesus picks up a cross and begins to climb a hill. "Are you coming?" he asks them.

"To where?"

"To the kingdom. Do you still not recognize the way?"