

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 7 (Pentecost 3), Series A
Saturday, June 20th, 2020
Sunday, June 21st, 2020

Sermon: Body and Soul

Text: Matthew 10:21-33; Psalm 91

Focus: Death is not the worst thing that can happen to someone.

Function: That they would not fear death.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “We should fear love and trust in God above all things” (SC, First Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The words of Jesus: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28, ESV).¹ The current pandemic has revealed to me a startling truth about American Christians: we are afraid to die. In fact, I might argue that we fear death almost as much as the pagans and unbelievers living next door. This is proven by the great lengths we are willing to go to and extraordinary measures we are willing to take in order to avoid contracting the corona virus. In fact, it seems as though our nation has, by the large, taken the approach of avoiding the spread of the virus at all costs. And by “all costs,” I mean literally the cost and devastating impact of a shuttered economy, increased domestic violence and drug abuse, and a surge in suicide due to social isolation.

Many of you know that early on during the “pandemic,” I urged caution and compliance with the state’s stay-at-home orders. In late March, President Trump—under pressure from the CDC—projected that 2,000,000 people would likely die from the corona virus. So we stayed home from work, stocked up on canned goods, and worshiped online while we waited out the

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

threat. We wore our masks and maintained physical distancing. But within a few weeks, it quickly became clear—thanks be to God!—that covid-19 is not nearly as deadly as feared. God answered our prayers and spared us.

But three months later, even after restaurants, gyms, and churches reopen their doors, Americans are still afraid of the virus. There's nothing wrong with caution: wearing masks, physical distancing, and washing our hands. (*Aside: I was actually surprised to learn how many people weren't washing their hands before the corona virus!*)

But many people are beyond cautious; they're outright fearful. I've spoken with a number of people who tell me that they will not leave their homes until there is a cure or vaccine for "the virus." But what if there never is a vaccine? There are lots of viruses for which we have no vaccine, including the common cold and HIV/AIDS. Scientists are working on a vaccine for covid-19, but that doesn't guarantee they can create one. Are you really going to spend the rest of your life hiding indoors? The fear of death is in direct violation of Jesus' repeated command in today's Gospel *NOT* to be afraid: "Have no fear of them..."; "And do not fear..."; "Fear not, therefore..." (Matt. 10:26, 28, 31).

In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther instructs us to "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." What do you fear more: the corona virus or God? Whom do you trust more: politicians, scientists, or *God*? In the Large Catechism, Luther defines a god as "that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart.... | Whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god" (LC, I, 2-3). Who or what is your god? What do you fear the most: death, unemployment, foreclosure, or loss of sanity? Whom do you trust to save you

from the pandemic? Even Governor Polis stated on one of his clergy calls, “Neither President Trump nor Governor Polis can keep you safe.”

As of June 17th, the CDC reported that there were about 117,000 confirmed deaths from Covid-19 in the United States. 117,000 is a lot of people. That’s similar to the population of Fargo, North Dakota. So imagine if the entire city of Fargo were wiped out over the past three months. That would be a real loss! Yet compared to an estimated population of 328 million people in America, that means that less than four-hundredths of one percent (0.035%) of our population has died from the corona virus. Only 5.4% of people who contract it die from it. When compared to deadly plagues of the past, such as the Black Death (Bubonic Plague) in medieval Europe or the Spanish Flu 100 years ago, this is a lesser threat.

I’m not denying the fact that covid-19 is a real virus and a possible threat. But we take risks every day. Compare the 117,000 who died from corona virus to 647,000 deaths annually from heart disease (or 1 in 4 deaths).² Are we as a country going to suddenly stop eating fried chicken, pizza, and cheeseburgers? Not very likely. Did you know that the flu kills about 50,000 per year? That makes the corona virus more like a very bad flu than a deadly plague.

In Mel Gibson’s award-winning film, *Braveheart*, the actor-director portrays Scottish patriot William Wallace in his fight for freedom against their English overlords. In one battle scene, before taking the field against the enemy, Wallace urges his ragtag army of farmers not to fear the well-trained and better equipped English Army. “All men die,” Wallace declares, “but not all men truly live.” If you fight, you might die, he admits. If you don’t fight, you’ll live, but one day when you’re old and dying in your bed, you’ll regret that you cannot say you stood with William Wallace for freedom. In other words, don’t allow fear to rob you of a meaningful life.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/facts.htm>

“All men die, but not all men truly live.” In America we are allowing fear of the corona virus to rob us of a meaningful life. Just because you’re not dead doesn’t mean you’re living. What kind of life is it to hide in your house without contact with your friends, neighbors, grandchildren, and pastor? How can you love and serve your neighbor when you are afraid of your neighbor and suspicious of him? How do we enjoy our freedoms when we are cut off from community?

And more importantly: how do we thrive and grow in our Christian faith if we are cut off from the fellowship of the Church and the Lord’s Sacraments? How long will this go on? How long can we cower in fear? How long will we fear, love, and trust in other things than Jesus? You are probably safer at church than you are the grocery store or restaurant drive-thru. Think about that for a moment.

God loves you. He promises to protect you. In our Psalm we read:

“A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you....
Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—
No evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.
For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways” (Ps. 91:7, 9-11a).

God’s holy angels are watching over you.

Does this mean that nothing bad will ever happen to you? No, of course not. Bad things happen to people because we live in a fallen world ruined by sin. But we trust that God works all things for good for those who love him (Rom. 8:28). And we believe that in the midst of suffering and pain, death and disease, God is with us. Indeed, Christ promises, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20b).

Now I'm not suggesting that the lives of the people who died are worthless or insignificant. Every human life is sacred to God from womb to tomb. Every death is a tragedy. And I am sorry for the grieving friends and families of all 117,000 covid-19 victims who have died in the United States—and many more around the world. But don't forget: we all will die from something—unless Jesus comes back first.

Do you know what the number one killer is worldwide? **Sin!** Death is God's judgment on human sin. "The wages of sin is death..." (Rom. 6:23a). We die because Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. We die because *we* sin each and every day. There's no getting around that. 100% of all people die because of sin.

But death is not the worst thing that can happen to somebody. It's not! It may be true that death is our enemy (1 Cor. 15:26), but the Christian doesn't fear death because Jesus died and rose again. Indeed, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21), for in death the Christian's days of sinning come to an end, and we find rest in the presence of our heavenly Father, which is why St. Paul said he would rather be "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). See? Death is not the worst thing that can happen to somebody.

The worst thing that can happen to somebody is to die in *unbelief or apostasy*—without hope and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The worst thing that can happen to you is not to suffer for a time from illness or disease, but to suffer in hell for eternity. That is why Jesus warns us "not to fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul..." (Matt. 10:28a). Who can kill the body? The government, our enemies in combat, a murderer, wild beasts, the corona virus, cancer, and people who persecute the Church. All of these can destroy the body. But they cannot kill the soul. "Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28b). Who's that? The devil? God? Not the devil. The devil isn't in charge—not even in

hell. Jesus has the keys of Death and Hades (Rev. 1:18). He's the one running the show. Only God has the power and authority to destroy body *and* soul. And he doesn't want to. Rather, he desires that the wicked would turn and live. Repent and be saved!

Jesus words in today's Gospel reading (Matthew 10:21-33) were encouragement for 1st century missionaries who would encounter persecution. These instructions—along with the examples of Christian martyrs—teach us something that we've forgotten: how to die well. Christians do not *seek* death. Jesus says, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next..." (Matt. 10:23a). The early Church discouraged Christians from *trying* to get killed for being a Christian. That amounted to a form of spiritual pride. So also we should not take a cavalier attitude toward the corona virus (or any cause of death). It's foolish and unloving to brag or boast about how careless you are.

But when faced with certain death because of their confession of faith, the Christian martyrs did not change their stripes and bow down to offer incense to the statues of the emperor. They feared God more than men. They feared God more than death. And so, by Jesus' blood and their testimony, they overcame death (cp. Rev. 12:11).

We have forgotten how to die. We have so much medical technology and drugs available to us, that we make every effort and attempt to avoid pain and suffering. Rather than dying with a proper farewell to our loved ones, we drift off into a drug-induced morphine coma. Or we fight the inevitability of death using ventilators and defibrillation devices even when the only hope left in this life is the hope of resurrection.

Historically, in Christian circles a good death was one that you endured patiently after reconciling with your enemies, blessing your loved ones, and setting your affairs in order. Having the strength and courage to face death and not recoil from the suffering was the very

definition of death with dignity. Again, like martyrdom, Christians do not *seek* suffering, but when it comes, we endure it, knowing that suffering produces endurance, character, and hope.

“And hope does not put us to shame” (cf. Rom. 5:3-5).

Last week, in a message about persecution, I said that Christ will be with us in court and in jail. That remains true. Christ is also with us in life and in death. If we live, Christ is with us. If we die, we are with Christ. Either way, Jesus is always with us and for us. The same loving Lord who died to forgive our sins rose from the dead to give us the hope of eternal life. So don't be afraid. Don't stop living. Instead, fear, love, and trust in *God* above all things, including “the virus.” “Fear not,” Jesus says, “you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:31). If God takes care of the birds of the air and the flowers in the field, won't he take care of you (Matt. 6:28-30)? So “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” Christ has conquered them all. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.