

## **The Worship that is Our Very Lives**

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A Sermon Preached for Highland Baptist Church

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

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I've been thinking a lot lately about how disasters often bring people together. The very things that bring about the worst in our world can sometimes bring about the best within humanity. For instance, New Yorkers tell beautiful stories about this happening after 9/11. We saw it in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and after Hurricane Harvey in Houston a few years ago, too.

But a recent article in the *New York Times* suggests that there is at least one exception to this idea, and that is pandemics. That became blatantly clear to me earlier this year when grocery stores became empty and folks couldn't even get the basic necessities they needed in the early days of Covid-19.

In this article, David Brooks points out that while some disasters can and do bring people together, "if history is any judge, then pandemics generally drive people apart." Because these are crises in which "social distancing, or staying away from one another, is actually a virtue. It's needed. But, it also means that dread and fear of one another begin to overwhelm our natural bonds of affection and empathy for one another."

Pandemics not only kill people, but as he says in the title of the article, "Pandemics kill compassion, too."<sup>1</sup>

For instance, in his book on the 1665 London epidemic, Daniel Defoe says, "This was a time when every one's private safety lay so near them that they had no room to pity the distresses of others. The danger of immediate death took away all bonds of love, all concern for one another."

Or, when Cholera struck Naples in 1884, rumors swept through the lower city that officials were deliberately spreading the disease. So when public health workers came to help, many of the locals revolted, throwing furniture out their windows at them and even hurling them down stairs.

The Spanish Flu of 1918 produced similar reactions, too. John Barry, author of *The Great Influenza* says that as conditions worsened, health workers in city after city pleaded for volunteers to help care for the sick, but very few people actually stepped forward.

In Philadelphia, the head of emergency aid pleaded for help in taking care of sick children, and no one answered. He wrote, "There are families in which every member is ill, and the children are actually starving because there is no one to give them food." And yet still, no one came forward to help.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html>

David Brooks says this may explain one of the most puzzling features of the 1918 pandemic, which is this: “When it was over, people didn’t talk about it.”

There were very few books written about it, either. Famous writers like Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Hemingway all witnessed the pandemic first-hand, yet none of them even mention it in their writings. Which is especially striking when you consider that roughly 675,000 Americans lost their lives to the Spanish Flu, which is more than the number of Americans who were killed in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War – combined.

I’ve studied each of these wars in school at one point or another, and I don’t know about you, but I’ve heard more about the Spanish flu of 1918 in the past 6 months than I have in my entire life.

David Brooks speculates that perhaps the reason people didn’t write or share much about the Spanish Flu is because “they didn’t like who they had become” after it was all over. It was a shameful memory, and therefore people suppressed it.

Writer Dorothy Ann Pettit adds that the 1918 pandemic contributed to spiritual apathy, too. “People emerged from the pandemic physically and spiritually fatigued,” which I’m sure we can all relate to in these days. She says that “the flu had a sobering and disillusioning effect on the entire country.”

But, there is one exception to this idea that pandemics kill compassion, and that is within our health care workers. In every pandemic, there have always been doctors and nurses and all kinds of medical workers who respond with “unbelievable heroism and incredible compassion.” And I know we can definitely see that happening among us today, too.

As David Brooks says, “Maybe this time we will learn from their example. After all, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to take steps to fight the moral disease that accompanies the physical one.”

And so, how do we begin to do that – especially in light of the very real fatigue we are all experiencing, not to mention the escalating cases of Covid-19 surrounding us these days?

I’m struck by our Scripture readings for today, both of which highlight this invitation that I believe is before us. We have in Matthew 22 the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. And then in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, he outlines ways in which they are to share that love with their neighbors, using more than their words; Instead, he invites them to share their very selves – their very lives - with one another. It reminds me of some of the words we hold as sacred here at Highland, that when we leave this form of worship each week, we simply enter into another form of worship – the worship that is our very lives.

Especially at a time when we can't gather for worship face-to-face, I believe that loving our neighbor is perhaps one of the most important ways we can worship God with our very lives right now, even though that presents some unique challenges in light of the pandemic. The question is, what will that look like for you and me, and what will that look like for Highland?

You may remember back in 2014 when Ebola came to the United States. Unbeknownst to him, a Liberian man named Thomas Eric Duncan was carrying the disease. Thomas had flown to the Dallas/Ft. Worth International Airport with plans to marry a Dallas woman named Louise Troh, the mother of Duncan's son.

Five days after being in Dallas and being reunited with his family, Thomas began to feel sick. He finally went to the emergency room, but the doctor simply gave him a prescription for antibiotics and sent him home.

It wasn't until his second trip to the hospital by ambulance two days later that a nurse started to put the pieces together and made the call that there was a possible Ebola patient at the hospital. Despite treatment, Thomas Duncan passed away from the disease while being under quarantine a few days later. Two of his nurses also contracted the disease while taking care of him but were later cured.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, when the public got wind of the report, it suddenly sent the city of Dallas, and soon the rest of the country, spiraling in fear. I was living in Waco at the time, just an hour and a half south of Dallas, and I remember how quickly anxiety began to permeate our town.

An article in the *Dallas Morning News* says, "[In the midst of the Ebola crisis], we learned a lot about the chaotic, reason-eroding effects of pure, unharnessed panic. For a few dicey days, it sometimes seemed that Dallas was ground zero for the unhinging of our entire nation. [In] hindsight, it's easy to minimize how intensely frightened people were at the first and, to date, only Ebola outbreak in the United States."<sup>3</sup>

But in the midst of all of this, one of our sister churches, Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, jumped into action. Because Louise Troh, the wife of Thomas Dunan, and her children, are members there. Wilshire was suddenly thrust into the national spotlight when they discovered that their own church members had for over a week been living with a carrier of the infectious disease. Louise and her family were already under mandatory quarantine, but reporters from across the country filled the balcony of the sanctuary during worship the next Sunday to see how the church was going to respond.

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<sup>2</sup> Resources consulted include: <https://www.cnn.com/2014/04/11/health/ebola-fast-facts/index.html>, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/02/ebola-us-dallas-epidemic>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/news/2015/09/26/looking-back-dallas-ebola-crisis-showed-cost-of-fear-value-of-leadership>

Pastor George Mason told the church during this time of anxiety, “Love moves toward people. And fear moves away.” Looking back on the experience, he says, “We did everything we could do [safely] during that time to move toward.”

George, wearing all of the proper protection, visited Louise and her children when they were under quarantine, almost every day. Because of the Ebola infection risk, crews had removed all of the furniture in their apartment and stripped it down to the carpeting, and they weren’t allowed to leave. The church would bring them whatever they needed.

Meanwhile, media were outside, closely monitoring their apartment 24/7. Ultimately, George and a local Catholic priest worked with government officials to safely move the family in the middle of the night to an off-site camp grounds where they would have more space and privacy, and the media wouldn’t know where they were.

After their quarantine was over, Louise and her family were grieving all that had happened to them and all that had been taken away from them. And in the midst of that unbelievably hard time, *no one in Dallas would rent them a place to live*, so several people from Wilshire stepped up to buy them a condo that Louise and her children could ultimately rent once they got on their feet again.

But they had nothing. Officials who decontaminated it burned all their possessions, saving only a few personal documents, some photographs, and a Bible. Once again, their faith community was immediately ushered into the daily work of loving their neighbors. And I don’t know about you, but I can’t think of a better picture of the worship that is our very lives than that.<sup>4</sup>

But sharing our very lives, our very selves with one another, as we read in 1 Thessalonians, is never easy. As Professor Holly Hearon points out, “it requires a willingness on our part to be vulnerable; to not only share what we know, but to live what we know.”<sup>5</sup>

Because if we only share what we “know” about God’s love – that doesn’t really cost us anything. There’s no risk associated with that. But if we seek to live with God’s love – if we really try to show up in the world with our very lives in the ways we care for and respond to one another – friends that is going to be hard and holy work.

Because this kind of love asks us to get out of our comfort zones. It is always going to cost us something. It means putting ourselves out there in ways that may not always be reciprocated. It means we risk getting hurt by the people with whom we have shared our very lives. It means that people will at some point almost always let us down.

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<sup>4</sup> Resources consulted include: “Eye on the Storm: Strategies and Self-Care for Facing the Media,” Workshop at CBF General Assembly, Thursday June 14, 2018, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/news/2015/04/24/as-it-embraced-member-in-dallas-ebola-crisis-church-found-its-own-redemption>, <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/texas/pastor-reminds-dallas-leaders-of-challenges-faced-by-fiancee-of-ebola-fatality/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1045](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1045)

And yet, I also believe that vulnerability is the only way forward if we truly seek to share our full selves with one another and with the world in ways that are real and transformative. And I believe that this is what life in the Kingdom of God is truly about.

You see, if the pandemic has made anything clear, it is this: we need one another. I don't need what you know about God. I need the God I experience in you and through you.

I was having a hard day earlier this week when one of our Highland members, Chris Webb, came to visit with me here at church. And I so needed what Chris shared with me that day. It made a difference in the rest of my week. You see, at a time when I can't see your faces as I preach week after week – I need you.

- As our staff continue to discern the best ways to engage with one another and to live on mission and to care for our community in the midst of a difficult time – we need you.
- At a time when our finance and faithful giving ministry groups are working endless hours toward budget preparation for 2021 and what it will look like for us to do the work of Love together at Grinstead and Cherokee next year – we need you.
- As we will soon begin holiday collections for Habitat for Humanity and Highland Community Ministries and Shelby Park – we need you to be a part.

I am so encouraged by our neighbor groups that are starting this month at Highland. Carol and our deacons have done an incredible job working to ensure that everyone who considers themselves part of the Highland family is in a neighbor group. A deacon will be contacting you by the end of the month – and if for some reason you don't get contacted please contact us and we will make sure you get assigned to a group. We genuinely want to know how you're doing....Because we love you. We miss you. We care about you. And we need the unique and beautiful gift that our good God can only offer to this world through you.

Friends, sometimes worship at Highland looks like gathering in this sacred space to sing and pray and reflect together...

- But sometimes it looks like making a phone call to check on one of our senior adults who can't get out of their house right now.
- Sometimes it looks like coming together to raise money to help a church member who's in a difficult situation.
- Sometimes it looks like taking a moment to check on that family who is absolutely overwhelmed and exhausted with working from home and 24/7 parenting and NTI.
- Or dropping off food and drinks for people who are quarantined in the trailer outside of their house.
- Or just checking in on that person you haven't seen in awhile because you want them to know they are not forgotten.

I don't know what your life of worship looks like these days. But my prayer is that we as Highland Baptist Church won't shirk back in the midst of a pandemic. Rather, my hope is

that we will be a people who boldly and creatively and vulnerably and prophetically show up for one another with our whole selves in whatever ways God leads us. That we will be people who live with a radical love of our neighbor – even in the midst of a pandemic.

And that when all this is over, they won't say that the pandemic of 2020 killed our compassion. But rather that the pandemic challenged and invigorated and inspired our compassion – and the worship that is our very lives.

May it be so of us, friends. Amen.