

“Wear Your Mask and Keep Praying” by Amy Moffitt



July 12, 2020

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Good morning, Seekers! As Peter said, my name is Amy Moffitt, and I am both honored and terrified by the opportunity to preach today at Seekers. As I think most of you know, I visited Seekers once years ago, but I hadn't been back and wasn't a part of this community until life circumstances –most notably the global pandemic–had me looking for a community of faith online. I've really enjoyed worshipping with you all, and I count this experience as one of the surprising silver linings of this season.

Since I put it out there that I have a degree from Wesley Seminary, I want to caveat that my emphasis was in pastoral

counseling and that I've never taken a preaching class. As for my exegetical approach, I'd like to dignify it by calling it midrash, but essentially it's just me struggling with and reacting to scripture. If I am a theologian of any sort, it's probably more in the school of Woody Allen than Wesley.

Peter mentioned that I put Presby-Cathlo-Episcopa-Mennonite under "denomination" on my seminary application. Like many of you, my faith journey has taken me down many different paths and exposed me to different kinds of people, different faiths, different perspectives. I know, as do you all, that there is more than one way to approach any given scripture, and that some of those ways do harm. I also know that there are ways of doing church that bring an incredible amount of harm, and there are ways of doing church that end up feeling not much like "church" at all.

You guys may be familiar with the Annie Dillard quote from *Teaching A Stone To Talk*. It goes like this:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

It's a tricky thing we're doing, so we'd better be honest... and that's what I'm going to do today.

When I read the scriptures for today, my heart sank. I was hoping for something really comforting, something that would

be a spring board for a meditation on God's love for all and His care for us during this time of turmoil... and maybe those scriptures read that way to some of y'all, but that wasn't what I heard. I heard this:

Genesis 25:19-34: The language of "birthright"— a social and economic place given to a child simply by virtue of having been born first— paired with permanently "giving up a birthright" through words spoken hastily in ravenous hunger... with the result of God granting His favor towards an entire people group that are children of one person and withdrawing it from another person who grew at the same time in the same womb.

Psalms 119:105-112: The notion of conforming without error to extensive laws and statutes governing practically every area of life that were given by God to the Hebrew nation... and bringing that perfect, slavish conformity to rules before God as the evidence needed to obtain God's protection and blessing

Romans 8:1-11: The declaration of a clear distinction between those "governed by flesh" and those "governed by the spirit", with those who are in the flesh unable to follow God's law, and therefore unable to please God, period.

Matthew 13:1-9: The illustration of how many different ways there are to lose the message of the Gospel and to be shut off from its hope, and the sense of the passivity of that, as though the message is just stolen from some people and they don't have the ability to receive or retain it.

I did *not* find this set of scriptures comforting, and I had absolutely no idea how to talk about them. Commence wrestling with the ancient texts. And by wrestling with ancient texts, I mean I walked around my house and did laundry, and my job, and ate and slept and dealt with the dishes... and occasionally, I fretted about these texts while I was doing those things.

Of course, what I'm mostly fretting about, as we all are, is

COVID-19, and how poorly the response to the disease has been managed in this country, and how many people have gotten sick, and how many have died, and how many of my loved ones will get sick and die, and if I will get sick and die. I fret about how long life will feel like this. I fret about the mental health crisis I see unfolding in people. And as I have many, many times since that dark November night in 2016, I fret about how people of faith were complicit in making this happen when they voted in droves for one of the least qualified people any of us could possibly imagine to be President of the United States.

One day I was putting away some socks, fretting over this, and the phrase “magical thinking” came to my head, and then Thomas Cahill’s *Gift of the Jews*, and suddenly I had a point of connection to these scriptures.

As you may know, “magical thinking” is a concept that gets thrown around by a lot of educated folks, particularly those in the mental health world, and often as a way of subtly undermining the worldview of people of faith. In a nutshell, it describes the phenomenon whereby people believe that what they do, think or say affects events in the world in a way that doesn’t seem to be immediately causally connected... supernaturally. It can be seen as the difference between saying “I had surgery to remove my tumor” and “I asked God to get rid of my tumor and it went away”. It’s easy to demonstrate that the surgeon removed a tumor because you can ask the surgeon and anyone else who was there about what happened. It’s harder to demonstrate that God removed a tumor.

What I found myself musing about was the magical thinking of the pastors and faith leaders who have proclaimed that God would not allow them to get COVID-19 and have then contracted it and died, or the multiple stories of congregations that have continued to meet and have seen the disease sweep through their churches. I don’t think of this tendency to deny basic

cause and effect or to disregard science as implicit in Christianity. I think of it as something else entirely... a return to some sort of folk religion where people claim power over God to do as they wish irrespective of their actions. It's the same logic that might cause someone to vote for a dangerously incompetent elected official in high office because they think he's God's choice.

And then I remembered reading Thomas Cahill's *The Gift of the Jews* over 20 years ago... by which I mean I remembered the only thing about that book that I still remember, Cahill's assertion that the laws written down in the Torah were as much about God creating a civilization out of the Hebrews as they were about any sort of spiritual reality. I've not done enough reading about ancient civilizations to speak with authority on their practices around hygiene, sexuality, and food preparation, but suffice to say that the scrappy little Hebrew nation would likely have been wiped out by disease had they **not** been given these laws. Also, we see accounts in scripture of some of the savagery of other nations (and of the Hebrew people to other nations, to be honest), but at least **within** the Hebrew nation, the laws around managing conflict and how to handle people who hurt other people also served to create order and preserve life for those within the community.

In other words, the story of the Old Testament and the notion of God's laws, as alien and difficult as it is for me to identify with now, is a story of a God who protected and shaped and brought order to people through these laws that now strike me as draconian. As I thought about how bizarre the concept of birthright was to me, I thought of the requirement to wear a mask in public... a requirement that also seems bizarre, except in the presence of a runaway disease with no vaccine that is transmitted via droplets from the nose and mouth. In that case, the law is literally life... and in the case of a primitive nomadic society, so are laws around the preparation of food, and what can and cannot be eaten, and

perhaps even of birthright.

I don't want to get down into a rabbit hole around how many of the ritual practices of the early Jews can be considered in pragmatic terms and how many really are just ritualistic and reflective of general religious practices of the time, but this line of thinking gave me a window to go back to today's scriptures... to see the notion of birthright in Genesis as a way of imposing a baked in family order so that siblings were perhaps less likely to kill one another in a fight over limited resources. It gave me the ability to see the notion of prizing conformity with God's laws in Psalm 119 as an acknowledgement that those laws were put in place because God loved His people and wanted them to survive and obedience to those laws was a way of honoring and returning that love.

And then, with my harsh reaction to the Old Testament scriptures softened somewhat, I remembered that the text of Romans 8 is part of a longer argument in Romans against those who wanted to continue to use conformity with laws as the sole means of receiving God's favor. Paul is using the concept of "being in the flesh" to describe that slavish conformity to laws for their own sake while not accepting the gift of the Spirit of God that Jesus poured out on His followers after His ascension into heaven. Being "in the flesh" in this context meant refusing to accept the continuing revelation of God's love, now not only memorialized in laws that were to keep His people alive and together, but in the embodied person of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. And then I was able to revisit the Gospel, where I had come up with a picture of a cold and distant Jesus blandly describing to His followers how few people have the guts or ability to stick with the faith, and I was able to see Him as one who knew the nature of man intimately, and who acknowledged the real limitations of human endurance in faith with sadness.

I found myself marveling at the practicality of God, the reality of God, of how clearly He sees and knows who we are

and what limits us, of how He responds with teachings that acknowledge where we are and where civilization is, and works within that. And nowhere more is the practicality and reality of God seen than in the embodied flesh of Jesus Christ, God made man, who came to live in history in a body, within the real and difficult context of an oppressed and marginalized people, and who laughed and cried and suffered and died at the hands of the empire in a betrayal by His own people. Human, deeply and solidly and unalterably so, but also God. God with sweat. God with skin. Real God... not a magical fairy that no one ever saw but chose to believe in anyway.

And we too, have seen God work in our lives in practical ways, right? We have seen answers to prayer that looked like real life answers. We haven't had things happen like we blinked three times and suddenly a pot of gold appeared in front of us (though if you have had that happen please tell me because I want to know how you did that). We've asked for help and seen God show up within our context, our reality, our ability to understand and cope. A real God giving real answers. Sometimes those do look like miraculous and sudden healings, but sometimes they don't. Sometimes they look like God not giving up on us and continuing to comfort us as we mess up time and time again.

God has not made Donald Trump a good President, and God is not instantly healing my family members from COVID-19 despite their impassioned prayers. But God is not absent. He has shown himself throughout history to be a God who comes into history and makes Himself known, but He works *through* history, and through His people. Our God is not a God of magical thinking. He is a God who lives and moves with us and through us, and He is not silent now, even when we are longing for Him to simply take this all away. He is at work, and He will be at work, now and when we have adapted to this new virus. Wear your mask and keep praying. The story's not over yet.