

**Lectionary 24 Year B Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B**  
**September 12, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Throughout the pandemic, I've seen all kinds of yard signs, Facebook posts and arguments that encourage us to "choose faith, not fear." By this, they usually mean that we need to put our faith in God in matters surrounding the pandemic, and not resort to so-called fear by hiding behind masks and getting vaccinated. They argue that we should trust in God rather than science—as if the two were at odds with one another. And this is a much larger issue that goes far beyond the pandemic. People have argued for years that trusting in science and modern medicine goes against their Christian faith.

In fact, one of Martin Luther's lesser known writings is called, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague," which he wrote in 1527 during an outbreak of the bubonic plague in Germany. In this essay, he addresses this same question of trusting in God or trusting in science, and how we are called to act in response to a community health crisis. Luther writes, "I shall ask God mercifully to protect us."—again, Luther does trust that God is active, and he believes that prayer can be powerful. But Luther continues, "Then I will fumigate, purify the air, administer medicine, and take medicine. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order to not become contaminated, and thus perchance inflict and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me. But, I have done what he has expected of me, and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person, but will go freely. This is a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy, and does not tempt God."

This essay was written nearly 500 years ago, and the arguments have only changed ever so slightly. Luther's words are still especially applicable to our struggles today. Martin Luther tells his community, in no uncertain terms, that we are called to use all the precautions that God has made available to us in order to protect ourselves and others. Medicine and other precautions are not used out of fear, but out of love. And loving our neighbor also means that we help them when they're in need, even when there may be some danger in doing so.

And I think that Jesus addresses this issue within a larger context in our Gospel reading this morning. Jesus tells his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Jesus tells us here that it is our duty to deny ourselves and our own desire for comfort for the good and safety of the community. And this applies to the pandemic, but it also applies to our choices on a much larger scale.

Martin Luther, in his well-known essay, *The Freedom of a Christian*, writes that a Christian is "simultaneously perfectly free and subject to none, and perfectly bound subject to all." In other words, we are perfectly free to make our own choices, but we are also fully bound to the needs of our neighbor and world. We have every right to choose how to live our lives, but these choices must also be made for the good of our community, rather than at the expense of our community. And so, I very firmly believe that it is part of our Christian duty that we deny our own desire for comfort, and make every reasonable effort to protect one another from this virus and in other circumstances we may encounter. The truth is, I don't like wearing a mask; I'm sure none of us really do. But I wear my mask in order to protect those around me. This week, a sinus infection has worked its way through our household, and thankfully it was just a sinus infection. But my wearing a mask helps to stop the spread of that virus, as well as COVID-19—which any

one of us could be carrying without even knowing it right now. Wearing a mask and getting vaccinated are acts of faith, because I have taken these actions to protect my community, and especially to protect those who are physically unable to be vaccinated and protect themselves.

But our Christian duty goes beyond preventing the spread of illness. Our identity as Christians means that we are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus. And how often do we live a little too comfortably in our lives, perhaps at someone else's expense? I'm sure we can all point to times when we have failed to live as Christ commands.

In denying ourselves, we lose our old way of doing things, we lose a life centered on ourselves. But God promises that as we take up our cross, we will experience new life in Christ. And this new life is not something that we have to carry and journey on our own. God has provided a community for us to journey together as we seek to care for and protect our neighbors. We carry the burden together, and we work together, for the sake of our community and world. In living for others, we know God's love for us and the world. In caring for others, we share God's compassion with them. In raising others up, we experience God's justice and mercy. And in walking with others, we help to carry their burden, just as Jesus carries ours. This is what it means to be Christians; this is our Christian identity.

But just as our Gospel reading teaches us about our identity as Christians, our Gospel reading also properly identifies Jesus as our Messiah, our leader, and our guide.

And so, even in the midst of the ongoing pandemic, and even when all of this seems like new and unexplored territory, we have the peace of knowing that Christ is there to lead the way, that Christ has walked the road before us. Christ our Messiah knows how it feels to give up his own comforts and desires for the health and care of others. Christ our Messiah knows what it means to give up his desire to save his own life, and to take up his cross for the sake of the world. Christ our Messiah gave his own life for us as he died on the cross, granting each of us salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life.

Christ has walked this road. Christ knows the sacrifices that we will make along the way. But Christ our Messiah also promises that he will *always* be our guide and will always lead us to new and abundant life. Thanks be to God. Amen.