

February 13, 2022
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

Today is annual meeting Sunday. Usually I use the sermon time on annual meeting Sunday for what I think of as a kind of “state of the parish” address. But things aren’t usual, for the second year in a row. For the second year in a row, my contribution to the parish annual parish report was what I called a “pandemic journal” of our common life over the past year. I realized partway through writing it that I am tired of the word *pandemic*, so much so that I even went through and eliminated a few of its repetitions.

Near the end of every calendar year, Merriam-Webster selects a Word of the Year. According to their website, “Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year is determined by data: the word must have been a top lookup at Merriam-Webster.com in the past twelve months, and it must have seen a significant increase in lookups over the previous year.”¹

Unsurprisingly, the Merriam-Webster Word of the Year for 2020 was *pandemic*. Also unsurprisingly, the Merriam-Webster Word of the Year for 2021 was *vaccine*. Regarding that choice, Merriam-Webster said this:

The word *vaccine* was about much more than medicine in 2021. For many, the word symbolized a possible return to the lives we led before the pandemic. But it was also at the center of debates about personal choice, political affiliation, professional regulations, school safety, healthcare inequality, and so much more.

Few words can express so much about one moment in time.²

For the true word aficionados, Merriam-Webster added this detail:

Vaccine comes from the Latin word for “cow,” *vacca*, because the term was initially used to refer to inoculation using doses of cowpox that, it was discovered, protect humans against smallpox. This word is a relatively recent one in English, dating back to the 1880s.³

Today’s gospel reading is the opening portion of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. It includes, most notably, Luke’s version of the beatitudes, which are different—and tougher—than the ones in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. Matthew offers up a slew of blessings, but Luke serves up four blessings and four woes, in perfectly paired oppositions: poor/rich, hungry/full, weeping/laughing, hatred/admiration. Luke’s theme of societal reversal, which Mary most poetically prophesies in the Magnificat, is now voiced by Jesus.

It's not quite what I expected, but it feels about right, with large-font *Thomas's* and *pandemic* and *Zoom* and *decisions* and, most especially, the centering of *worship*. Now, this isn't completely accurate. If the program was smart enough for me to force it to sum the instances of *vaccine* and *vaccination*, the combination would have appeared the same size as *Zoom*.

With this, finally, I'll offer a few words about the state of the parish. To be honest, it's not the easiest thing to talk about. The pandemic—that word again—has exacerbated challenges we were already facing in terms of finances and membership. For mainline Protestant Christianity more broadly, the pandemic has hastened the pace of changes that were already underway. I appreciate the truths that are being revealed, and I am convinced that the changes are for the better. I'm talking not just truths in the broader society, but truths within the church. Nonetheless, it is awfully daunting to be among those who are staring into the vast unknown future.

It has helped me to read articles like one in *The Atlantic* in October, written by an Episcopal priest in Richmond, Virginia. Its title was this: "My Church Doesn't Know What to Do Anymore." And the subtitle was this: "Last year was hard, but at least the answers were straightforward." The article didn't offer any concrete advice, but at least I felt less alone.

Understanding isolation as a type of illness, then connection is a type of healing. I think we're pretty good at that. St. Thomas's has long been a church where people come for healing through connection. Whatever else comes, I expect that this aspect of our shared St. Thomas's identity will continue. I could even see it being an area of growth for us. I seem to be honing my own skills for healing, since, as I mentioned last week, I'm pursuing study in life coaching, spiritual direction, and reiki. It was only as I prepared this sermon that I added all that up to healing. Maybe the urge to heal is moving in your own lives as well.

Vaccines have come a long way since the days of inoculation using cowpox. If God really is concerned with healing, and I think that's true, then maybe the Holy Spirit had a hand in that. And, when it comes to healing, I expect the Holy Spirit has things in store for us, too.

Notes

¹ "'They' Is Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year 2019," Merriam-Webster, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/woty2019-top-looked-up-words-they> (accessed February 13, 2022).

² "Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year 2021," Merriam-Webster, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year/vaccine> (accessed February 13, 2022).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Luke 6:17-19 NRSV.