

Going Viral

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 13:33

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester – Digitally via Zoom during the COVID-19 Pandemic

It is almost unfathomable to me.

A little over a year ago, on January 20 of 2019 we canceled church here at First Baptist due to potentially dangerous weather. That was the first time that I had ever been a part of canceling Sunday services – it was the first time I had ever *experienced* the canceling of Sunday services in my lifetime. Though there are times when public health and community safety have to be prioritized over an individual worship service, it was still odd to me. Sundays to me are an immovable reality. My dad ran the sound system at our very large church when I was a kid and there weren't a lot of others in the church who knew how to do that, so he was somewhat indispensable. So Dad was at church every. Single. Week. I learned growing up though that we weren't really there because of Dad's commitment to the sound system; Dad was committed to the sound system because of the reason we were there. Something about a community being gathered in the same place in worship week in and week out without fail holds God at the center of those people and does something to manifest the presence of God in the world through the lives of those marked by what occurs in that one hour every seventh day. I learned in time that it wasn't my presence in that place among those people that was critical and it wasn't my wellbeing, spiritual or otherwise, at stake in my being there either. It wasn't really even the event itself that was so critical – it was the sheer communal fortitude of a community unrelentingly committed to making known the presence of God in tangible form every. Single. Sunday. Like the beat of an unstoppable drum through the ages would be the gathering of the people of God Sunday after Sunday after Sunday – or Friday or Saturday or whatever other holy days we children of God might hold sacred. It is unfathomable to me that we are not physically together today.

But today is not like last January. It isn't just First Baptist Church of Rochester, it isn't even just churches in the Rochester area that have made the difficult decision to forego worship in person today. All over the United States and in countries throughout the world church buildings stand empty or very close thereunto. Not all of them, but many. If we could take worldwide attendance within the church universal, there would be fewer faithful fannies in pews this day than most Sundays in the history of the world relative to total population. It is unfathomable to me that this is where we are today, but the canceling or the shifting of worship services to an online format is not even close to the extent of the magnitude of what we are experiencing.

We have run out of toilet paper too. We've run out of a lot of things actually. Here in Rochester and in cities around the country and indeed around the world we have seen a kind of public behavior that has been described as "hysteria" by some. It isn't hysteria though, I've seen it. When I went out to get a few provisions of my own I experienced large crowds of entirely rational, mostly patient, kind, even generous people working in an orderly fashion to stock up on what they would need to get through a few unpredictable days. We're not in hysterics, we're just a little worried and we don't know what comes next. Yes, some have greater anxiety than others by virtue of brain chemistry or prior experience or proximity to the threat. The illness that has caused all of this doesn't treat everyone fairly. Some are at greater risk of catching it and for some there are higher

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

consequences if they do. They and those who love them have higher levels of concern and the rest of the community, to my recognition, has pulled together to do all that we can to assure them that we are not ok with allowing greater risk to some than to others. Doing that though, has required shutting society down to a level of activity that nears Christmas Day levels of public vacancy in the roadways. There are now and will be further economic consequences to what is happening today and in the days ahead. There is and there will be real suffering on the part of those who contract the virus and the families of those who have not and will not make it through. These effects we know already will have their deepest impact on communities already struggling with other maladies. Those with pre-existing medical conditions will fare worse. Communities struggling against poverty will fare worse. Un and underemployed persons will fare worse. Children and families who rely on school districts for food, for child supervision while parents work, for stability and consistency will fare worse. People already shunned by their communities and families because of their identity will weather this storm worse than many others will. Yes, the stock market will take a hit, but that won't be an indicator of the worst suffering that comes from this unfathomable event. We might not even know the full extent of the suffering, because most of it will end up in places we, as a global society, hardly notice anyway.

We have all been inconvenienced. All of our lives have been disrupted. The world was already in a precarious place and what is happening now will doubtless make things harder for all of us. It is unfathomable to me how this *global* pandemic started.

I didn't even know what a Pangolin is until yesterday. It is a very small, ant-eating, scaly mammal that looks a little like an Armadillo in appearance and size. They are hunted illegally for their meat and smuggled into markets in various places around the world. They also often carry a virus that when compared to the virus currently sweeping the globe in human hosts has about a 90% similarity in genomic sequencing. We can't say with certainty that the virus came from them, but it appears that a smuggled, infected Pangolin came into proximity with another animal living or dead in a place that has its city center 7,281 miles from Rochester's. In that place in that moment the virus "jumped" from one species to another finding a new host capable of supporting it and it became something new. A structure about one fifty-thousandth the width of a human hair in a species I've never even heard of crossed by chance into one person in a place thousands of miles from here and a pandemic was born. The tiniest little thing has altered global activity, the tiniest little thing has changed the world.

That's how pandemics work we've learned, but let us not forget it is also how bread works – a tiny little organism is introduced to a new carrier and it begins to do its work causing its host to react, to swell and grow, and change both in form and substance. A tiny portion of that organism is taken and introduced to the next host and it too rises and becomes something it wasn't before. As many times as that organism, that yeast is divided out from itself it makes a new loaf of bread. A woman in Newcastle, Wyoming is still baking from starter dough that is 129 years old – those tiny organisms dividing, expanding and making bread. The tiniest little things can feed the world. That's how bread works and according to the gospel writer, Matthew, it's also how the Kingdom of God works. One tiny agent is introduced to a host, say a municipality or a school or a community or a neighborhood bringing with it the goodness of God and before you know it that goodness has divided and there are two carriers of God's love and justice and redemption. And before you know it there are four. And before you know it there are eight. And before you know it the Kingdom of God has broken out and it's skipping from community to community, it's crossing borders and traveling over seas and its changing the world.

We won't know the full impact of this event that we're living through for some time. With good fortune the measures that our community has taken will keep the case load in our region well below the capacity of our healthcare system, but it seems virtually certain that we will see more people get sick. I pray there will be no more loss of life, but we've already experienced plenty. There will be grief and loss. The impact of the mitigation efforts will force people into isolation, deepen existing poverty, and push people at the margins even further afield. Community resources will be stretched very thin and though I would love to believe that it won't

be the case, history suggests that recovery efforts will focus on the already privileged and skip over those who need it most.

There is much work ahead for those who seek the wellbeing of all, no shortage of things to do for those who believe in equity. Even right here within our own congregation we'll have our work cut out for us in staying together, keeping track of everyone we may not be able to see in person for a while, and staying up to date and involved in the lives of others. Our hope will be to not only to do that though, but for our love for each other to grow and divide and be spread to new hosts within our community. The sheer volume of work to be done is staggering if you think you about it. The pandemic is global and so is the need. We're looking for no less than to change the world. It is unlikely, I have to tell you, that any one of us can change the world. It isn't even likely that a church like ours together can make a dent in the need being generated by this pandemic let alone the need that existed even before. But our hope is in this: we know that at any moment a gesture of personal sacrifice for the benefit of another, or a moment of sharing, or an expression of caring, or an act of kindness can leap from its host into another and become something new. From there it can divide and spread and give life to entire communities. That's how the Kingdom of God works: a single community of faith, a single caring person, a single act could at any moment go viral.

Amen.