

Series: “Imitating Those Who Have Imitated Christ”
Sermon: “The Early Church and Epidemics in the Ancient World”
March 22, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

As has been announced, our service and our lesson this evening will be a bit briefer than they normally are.

And the lesson will also be a topical one.

It will be the first in a series that I expect I will come back to from time to time, called “Imitating Those Who Have Imitated Christ.”

And as opportunities come up, I’ll return to this series to consider those in the history of God’s people who have sought to live their lives in imitation of Christ, so we can reflect together on how we might learn from their examples, and follow in their footsteps.

The foundational Scripture behind this series is First Corinthians 11:1. There, Paul says to the church in Corinth: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

Paul there is telling the church in Corinth not just to heed his written words of Scripture, but to consider also his example of life. He reminds us that Christ, through his people, instructs his Church not only through the words of those who follow him faithfully, but also through their deeds.

We see that same principle applied in Hebrews chapter eleven, as the author there lists the faith of others that should serve as examples to us. And in that list, he includes not only examples from Scripture, but also, in verses thirty-five through thirty-eight, examples of the faithful outside of Scripture, and their deeds of faith in the intertestamental period.

The Scriptures call us then to look to the faith of those who have gone before us, and learn from their examples.

Tonight we will do that by considering the early church in the time of the epidemics of the ancient world – a topic especially relevant for us today.

As we prepare to consider that, let’s pray together.

Lord, your Proverbs tell us that by wise guidance we can wage war, and in an abundance of counselors there is victory.

As we face the spiritual battles ahead of us,
we turn now for guidance and counsel to the saints who have gone before us.

We look to their words and we look to their deeds,
as we consider our own.

We ask that you would help us to be imitators of them,
in whatever ways they were faithful imitators of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And it is in his name that we pray. Amen.
[Based on Proverbs 24:6 & 1 Corinthians 11:1]

Tonight we will consider how Christians in the ancient world responded to epidemics in their day.

And while many contemporary Christian leaders have been turning out articles on how Christians should live out their faith in a time of epidemic, it can be especially helpful, I think, to look to those who have gone before us.

In a recent post at the website of *First Things*, Ephraim Radner points out that while Christians in the past acknowledged the realities of epidemics, modern Christians have often joined the broader society in ignoring them, and the possibility that they might affect us. So, for example, the seventeenth-century *Book of Common Prayer* includes prayers asking God to deliver his people from plagues, and prayers of thanksgiving for when God does bring the end of an epidemic. The twentieth-century editions of the *Book of Common Prayer* do not contain those prayers. It's not as if we have not had epidemics in the twentieth century. But we have not really wrestled with their reality.

And so, it may be right that we humbly turn to Christians of the past for wisdom – to learn from their example.

The basis of much of what I'll say tonight comes from chapter four of Rodney Stark's book titled *The Rise of Christianity*. Rodney Stark is a sociologist of religion who has especially focused on early Christianity. *The Rise of Christianity* is his 1997 book on how, humanly speaking, Christianity grew and established itself in the ancient world. The subtitle says it well – the subtitle is: "How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries."

And in chapter four of his book, Stark argues that one important part of how the ancient Church grew and established itself in the ancient world was how it responded to epidemics.

Epidemics were a serious part of life in the ancient world. In the year 165 an epidemic came through the Roman Empire and over the course of 15 years it killed between a quarter and a third of the population. Then in 251 an equally deadly epidemic ripped through the empire again. Modern historians have begun to appreciate how such epidemics affected the ancient world and ancient history in ways that past generations of historians have not always taken note of. Modern historians of Rome have begun to appreciate the significance of such epidemics ... but, Stark argues, historians of the Church have not always done the same. He points out that the words "epidemic," "plague," and "disease" do not appear in the index of most modern works on the early church. But the early church itself had a different view. Writers like Cyprian, Dionysius, Eusebius, and other church fathers all believed that epidemics played a significant role in how the Church lived and even grew in their periods of history.

Stark, in his book, presents three theses on how Christians in the early church responded in significant ways to the epidemics of their day.

Tonight, I want to spend time considering each of those theses, and asking how, in each, the actions of the early church might serve as an example for us to imitate.

That will be our plan for this evening. So let's dive in.

The first thing Stark points out that early Christians did in responding to epidemics is that they held to, and were able to present to others, a much more satisfying explanation for why there is suffering in the world, and a much more solid reason to hope for a final deliverance from such suffering, compared to their pagan neighbors.

The various pagan worldviews, Stark argues, were overwhelmed and proved inadequate against the devastation of the epidemics of the ancient world. They had no meaningful explanation of *why* these epidemics happened, and no substantial answer to what one's hope was in the midst of one.

Stark puts it like this – he writes:

“Let us imagine ourselves in their place, faced with one of these terrible epidemics.

“Here we are in a city stinking of death. All around us, our family and friends are dropping. We can never be sure if or when we will fall sick too. In the midst of such appalling circumstances, humans are driven to ask *Why?* Why is this happening? Why them and not me? Will we all die? Why does the world exist, anyway? What is going to happen next? What can we do?

“If we are pagans, we probably already know that our priests profess ignorance. They do not know why the gods have sent such misery – or if, in fact, the gods are involved or even care. [...]

“Suppose that instead of being pagans we are philosophers. Even if we reject the gods and profess one or another school of Greek philosophy, we still have no answers. Natural law is no help in saying why suffering abounds; at least not if we seek to find *meaning* in the reasons. To say that survival is a matter of luck makes the life of the individual seem trivial.” [Stark, 79-80]

The dominant non-Christian worldviews in the ancient world had no meaningful answer as to why suffering occurred. And the same is true today.

For the materialist, sickness and death is just a natural part of life. They have no meaning. They are unpleasant for us – but they are not actually tragic. They're just how it is. Just as the ancient Greek philosophers often held, these things are just a matter of chance.

Such explanations can feel convincing in a philosophical debate or an armchair discussion. But in the midst of devastation such explanations ring hollow. They render everything meaningless. And they give no hope. There is something in our gut that tells us that this is not the right answer.

Others in our culture believe in spiritual things, but have little to say about how God relates to such disasters. Like the ancient pagan priests, they struggle to know why God allows such things, or they wonder if it is even under God's control. And so, in the end, such a view once again leaves each person on their own, without any sense of *why* there is such suffering in this world, or if there can be any real hope of deliverance.

One of the first things Christians offered to their world, that was devastated by sickness, was an explanation for suffering, and a grounding for real hope.

Christians believed that God had made the world good – free of sin and sickness and death. And then man, by his rebellion, had brought death and destruction into this world. One of the most helpful things the early church had to offer the baffled ancient world was the account of the Fall – an account of why the world is not the way it is supposed to be.

With that, Christians could explain why death and disease had such power in this world. But they could also explain why such forces were not the end of the story. For the individual they taught that all who trusted in Christ would go to be with Christ upon their death – whether they died in the oncoming epidemic or many years later. And for the world, Christianity taught that the day would come when Christ, who had already overcome death himself, would come again, and put an end to death and disease for all of his people – creating a new heaven and a new earth where he would live with them forever – a renewal of the original creational intent.

This was the explanation that the ancient Christians had. And it was a stark contrast to the explanations of the non-Christians around them.

And there were two important things they had to do with the superior explanation for suffering and the basis for hope that they had.

The first was that they had to truly believe these things themselves.

They had to really believe it. And that can be hard. It's easy to absorb the perspectives and the worldview of the culture around us without even realizing it. But they were called to believe something different. They were called to hold fast to their confession – their understanding of what was wrong with the world and what would make it right.

And we are called to do the same. But it is a struggle. It is very easy for us to look at the current pandemic the way the non-believing world does. It is very easy for us to find ourselves indignant, like everyone else, that such things even exist ... as we forget our confession that it was our sin – our rebellion against God – that introduced sin, and death, and disease into this good world that God has made.

And it is similarly easy for us to imitate the world around us and act as if there is no fate worse than death. Death is an intruder in this world, to be sure – death is part of the curse. It is not part of God's creational intention. But it is also not the end of the story. It is not the end of us. It is not the end of this world. Though the world laments as those who have no hope beyond this world, we do not – we know there is a hope beyond this life.

And so the first thing we are called to do is to hold firmly to the Christian explanation for what is wrong in this world, and the Christian hope for how it will be made right – just as Christians in the early church did.

But the second thing the ancient Christians did, and that we must do as well, is that they were ready to explain their understanding of what was happening in the world, and their hope in the midst of

it, to the pagans around them who were overwhelmed by their circumstances when their pagan faith was left in shambles.

And we must do the same.

In our culture, we are very good at distracting ourselves. But sometimes things break through. Think about the non-Christians you know. They have no solid understanding for why there is brokenness and disease and death in this world. They may try. But when truly confronted with what is wrong with this world, they are often left baffled. And even worse, they have no hope in response to the brokenness of this world. If they will pay attention, if they are forced to see it for what it is, then it will wreck their worldview. And one of the best ways you can love them in that moment would be to come alongside them, and gently help them understand another way to view this world we find ourselves in, through the lens of Scripture.

That is what we are called to be prepared to do – to give an answer for the hope that we have.

Of course, as we said this morning, we don't know the details of the purposes of God. But we do know the big picture in a way that no other worldview does. We know the One who made this world. We know how sin and brokenness entered into it. We know what its hope is.

Others don't.

Unexpected disaster tends to take out inadequate views of the world – it can demolish them just as it demolishes lives. If we are to stand firm ourselves, then we must stand firm in our Christian convictions. If we are to serve our non-Christian friends, neighbors, and family members, then we must be ready to explain to them what the Bible says about why there is such brokenness in this world, and what our hope is in the midst of it.

My question for you then, brothers and sisters, is: Are you doing this? Are you believing what you claim to believe, and are you ready to explain it to others?

First, are you believing what you profess? Are you clinging to the goodness of God's creation, the knowledge of where sin and death come from and the hope that we have in Christ?

Or ... does your emotional response to this crisis look a lot like the response of unbelievers around you?

The first thing for us to do is to believe what we claim to believe.

The second is to be ready to tell others about it.

Are you ready for that? Are you ready to explain to others why you view this differently than they do? When they struggle with questions, are you ready to tell them what Scripture says about this world – its goodness, its brokenness, and its hope?

I'm not asking if you're ready to go after people and argue with them about their worldview – but are you ready, when their worldview's inadequacies become apparent *to them*, to kindly explain to them what the Scriptures teach instead?

Believing what the Scriptures say and being ready to tell others about it was the first thing that Christians in the ancient world did so well in the face of ancient epidemics.

The second thing Stark points out that the early Church did in responding to epidemics is that their faith led them to sacrifice for those around them, and to unite in deep community solidarity, which helped them to get through such trials better than their pagan neighbors did.

Or, to put it more simply, Christians loved their neighbors much better than the pagans around them did.

David Brooks had a recent op-ed in *The New York Times* titled “Pandemics Kill Compassion, Too.” And Brooks's point was that, while some tragedies have a tendency to bring people together, epidemics have a tendency to drive people apart – and not just physically as a preventative measure, but relationally as well.

And that was certainly true in the ancient world. In the 5th century B.C. Thucydides described how during the plague in Athens in 431 B.C., once people recognized the contagious nature of the disease, people stopped caring for one another. The result, he writes, was that people “died with no one to look after them; indeed,” he goes on, “there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished through lack of any attention ... The bodies of the dying were heaped one on top of the other, and half-dead creatures could be seen staggering about in the streets or flocking around the fountains in the desire for water. [...] The catastrophe,” he goes on, “was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or of law.” [Quoted in Stark, 85]

And Dionysius reports the same sort of thing among non-Christians in the third century. “At the very onset of the disease,” he writes, “they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the road before they were dead.” [Quoted in Stark, 83]

Christians in the second and third centuries, by contrast, were known for their dedication to the sick – especially in times of an epidemic. They cared for them even if it cost them – they cared for them even at the risk of their own lives. They loved others before themselves, following in the footprints of Christ.

And this had a number of effects. One was that the mortality rate was much lower among Christians than among non-Christians during an epidemic. Some modern medical experts suggest that basic nursing care of the sick in these ancient plagues may have cut the mortality rate by as much as two thirds.

But beyond that, the Christians also cared for others. It was a constant frustration among pagans that Christians cared not only for other Christians, but for non-Christians as well. One pagan emperor wrote with frustration that the Christians, he said, “support not only their poor, but ours

as well, [while] everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.” [Quoted in Stark, 84] And the care of the sick in these epidemics was no exception.

And we need to note that this contrast between the actions of the Christians and the actions of the pagans was rational, Stark points out. The pagans did not believe in a meaningful life after death. The Christians did. And so risk and self-sacrifice take on very different meanings depending on your view of that. It would take much more courage for an ancient pagan to risk his life to nurse others to health than it would a Christian – because a Christian had a hope beyond this life where most pagans did not.

And that difference came out in how each community responded to epidemics in the ancient world.

And the question for us is: Does the same difference come out for us?

Now, obviously, it will look different. Our understanding of medicine is better and so the details of what we are able to do, or what we know would be best for people, are also different. But that doesn't change the underlying fundamental principle: If we, like the early Christians, believe what we say we believe, then our relationships to one another and to our relationships to our non-Christian neighbors should look different than other relationships between non-Christians.

Of course, non-Christians have love for one another as well. They are made in God's image and they reflect his image as they love one another. They can also make real sacrifices for those they care about. We should not deny any of those realities.

But we have more reasons – we have more of a basis – for making those loving sacrifices ourselves. As Stark says, because of what we believe, it requires less courage for us to lovingly sacrifice for others in these situations than it does for a non-Christian – and so we should be all the more characterized by such sacrifices.

What then should that look like for us?

Well, a number of things, but we can name at least a few.

First, it means that many Christians working in healthcare will continue to serve those in need – even as it places them at risk. We have some in our congregation in those situations. I hope that you are praying for them. And if you are one of those serving in the medical system right now, then I encourage you to bring yourself back, again and again, to the central hope that you have. Let that supplement your courage. You are taking risks. But you can do that because you know that this life is not the end of the story. And as you serve on the frontlines, know that you are joining with thousands of other Christians over the centuries, who, trusting in Christ, put themselves at risk to love their neighbors.

For the rest of us, it means we find ways to serve those around us – both those in our congregation and those who are our neighbors. Do you have an elderly neighbor, or a co-worker with an underlying medical condition, or a family you know from your kids' swim class who is

overwhelmed, or someone else who would benefit from you serving them in a practical way – whether running errands for them, making sure they have enough groceries, or something else?

Or maybe in our context of social distancing it means reaching out to those who are especially isolated. Maybe someone in the congregation whom you know is living alone. Maybe another mom who you know is feeling isolated with her kids. Maybe a neighbor down the street who could use to be checked in on. Our calling is to love our neighbors – both Christians and non-Christians. Our fathers and mothers in the faith risked their lives to do that during epidemics. Surely, we can make a few awkward phone calls to care for those the Lord has given to us.

And then, for many of us, in our day and age, loving our neighbors might mean socially isolating when we don't want to. It might mean that we realize that even if *we* are low risk, we can get other people sick. There were all sorts of reports of young people having big social gatherings right before lockdowns were announced in some states. Their feeling was that they were not at high risk, so it was okay. But that is profoundly selfish thinking. With all the medical knowledge we now have, we know that we can still get others sick. And in many cases Christian sacrificial love means following such guidelines for the sake of others if not for the sake of ourselves.

There are many other ways you can serve others in this time. Few will likely require the same level of risk or sacrifice that the early Christians exhibited ... but each will care for someone in need.

The question is, when the people around you look back at this time and think about how different people acted in their lives, will *you* look any different from others? Will you as a Christian be indistinguishable from others? – will you be concerned first and foremost with yourself? Or will the love of Christ come through your deeds, as you put concern for others before your own desires?

The second thing that Christians did in the early church during ancient epidemics was that they sacrificially loved their neighbors in a way that set them apart from everyone else.

Third and finally, Stark points out that as Christians in the ancient world formed deep and meaningful communities and relationships with one another, they also welcomed their pagan neighbors into those relationships.

There were a range of reasons why, in their particular situations, many pagans who went through epidemics lost many of their connections with other pagans. In some cases, their friends had fled the city. In others their friends had died. In others, their pagan friends had not cared for them during the epidemic, while Christians did.

But one key thing that Stark points out that Christians did well was that, when the dust settled and the epidemic was over, Christians maintained and made meaningful bonds with pagans who had also gone through that epidemic. In some cases, we could imagine those pagans coming out of the epidemic asking questions about life that their previous worldview could not answer, and bringing those questions to the Christians they had encountered. In other cases, they saw the difference in how their Christian friends treated them versus how their pagan friends treated them, and they turned more to the Christian community. In still other cases, pagans lost key relationships, and as

they looked for a new community, it was Christians who took them in. Taken together, Stark proposes that many of these relationships led to pagans becoming Christian believers.

All of that is a reminder that our calling to love our non-Christian neighbors will not end when this crisis is over. Many will ask questions not now, but after the fact. Many will respond to our deeds of love and service not right away, but when this is all over. Many will be open to a deeper friendship not at this moment, but at a later one. And our call to love them continues once this crisis is over.

As individuals and as a community – as a congregation – we need to be ready, once our doors are open again, to invite and to welcome non-Christians around us to join us – on Sundays, yes, but also in our lives. In our church, yes – but also in our homes. That is what the early Christians did, and as they did it, they imitated Christ who so often ate not with the righteous, but with those most in need of a spiritual physician. Our calling is to imitate those early Christians, just as they imitated Christ.

Stark, in his chapter, makes the argument that the difference in how Christians handled epidemics in the ancient world, when compared to how their pagan neighbors handled it, was one of the major elements that contributed to the growth of the Christian church. It was not the only element. But it was a significant one. It was part of what led to the church going from a tiny minority to a majority in the Roman Empire.

I found it helpful to look back at what the early Christians did during these epidemics. It is instructive. They imitated the love of Christ in their actions, and as they did, they gave us an example to imitate ourselves – with the necessary changes being made for our own situation.

But in the end, as is often true of great and faithful saints, what they did was incredibly basic.

It was three things. They believed what the Scriptures told them. They loved their neighbors sacrificially. And they embraced non-Christians and outsiders in relationships, acts of service, and explanations of their faith.

This is what we are called to do all the time. They are the basics of the Christian life. But as many have pointed out before, the Christian basics are easy to say, and easy to understand ... and much harder to actually *do*.

Brothers and sisters, that is the challenge for us.

It is helpful to consider examples to imitate. But in many ways, we know what we need to do. We need to believe God's Word. We need to love those around us – not just the folks we find easy to love, but especially those who are more challenging. And we need to embrace, in relationship, the non-Christians around us.

The difficulty of that is in the execution.

So what do *you* need to do now?

How do you need to reorient yourself to God’s Word again and again in this difficult time? How are you going to do that *every day*?

Who do you need to reach out to? And what are practical ways you can love those around you right now – both Christians and non-Christians alike?

And where in your life can you make room for real relationships with those who will come out of this pandemic with questions, with needs, with a desire for deep community and relationships?

Our challenge tonight is to think of some concrete ways we can do each of these things.

If we don’t ... then we run the risk of acting just like everyone else around us. We share their anxieties. We look out first and foremost for ourselves. We close ourselves off to outsiders rather than opening ourselves up to them.

As David Brooks warns, if we are not intentional, then we run the risk of not liking the kind of people we become in a time like this.

And so, let us look to those who have gone before us. Let us consider the Christians of the second and third century. Let us see how they preach Christ both by their words and by their deeds.

And then, let us imitate them, as they imitated Christ.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Brooks, David. “Pandemics Kill Compassion, Too.” *The New York Times*. March 12, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html>

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Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1996