

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, March 15, 2020
Second Sunday of Lent

“Lenten Apologies for Xenophobia and Nationalism
in the Midst of COVID-19”

Third sermon in our series entitled:
“Lenten Apologies to Galileo Galilei”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: John 4:5-30, 39-42



Friends, though we are not gathered this morning, we are nonetheless worshipping. So, we have *not* cancelled worship. We are using technology in order to continue worshipping together as brothers and sisters in Christ!



How appropriate that in a sermon series focused on science and faith, we are using technology and the internet to practice our faith. You

gotta love it! Given that this is the first worship service at Centre Church which is ‘virtual’, that is, we are livestreaming the service, we are making history this Sunday!

I am sure the COVID-19 crisis will not end very soon.



Therefore, perhaps in the coming weeks and months when I lead worship I will simply say, “Siri, do the Call to Worship.” Mary will be like, “Siri, play a prelude by Bach”. And Wendy Randall will be like, “Siri, please read John chapter five verse two through six”. Can you imagine if in the future I could say, “Siri, please preach a sermon”? Or better yet, Dart Everett will say, “Siri, please, for love of God and all that is sacred, preach for *only* ten minutes!”



Our scripture reading is notable in that it is the longest recorded discourse, or conversation between Jesus and anyone else.¹ (And note, Jesus and the woman practiced great ‘social distancing’ techniques by going to well at an unpopular time.) We might expect the longest recorded conversation Jesus might have had with anyone would be with a man, since in the Ancient Near East it was scandalous for men and women to fraternize. One might expect the longest recorded conversation to be with a disciple. After all, he had twelve of them and they were the ones most likely to remember and ‘record’ Jesus’ ministry.

¹ Better Bible Teachers, “Jesus Longest One-On-One Conversation”, <https://betterbibleteachers.com/2014/03/jesus-longest-one-on-one-conversation/>, accessed March 16, 2020.



One might expect Jesus' longest recorded conversation to be with a Jew, like Nicodemus (a Pharisee), because, after all, Jesus was a *rabbi*. So, this story of Jesus and the woman at the well is extraordinary. And the gospel writer really wants us to know this scene is radical. The writer points-out that the disciples were surprised to find Jesus "talking with a woman" (4:27). The woman Jesus met said, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan...How can you ask me for a drink?" (4:9). During the first century, northern Samaritans were foreign, tainted, heretical, and despised by southerners from Judaea. Folks, we have wild taboos here flying all over the place!

This morning, I would like to focus on the intersectionality of religion, race, and nationality because in Ancient Near East context the scene of Samaritan and a Jew hit all these divisions.



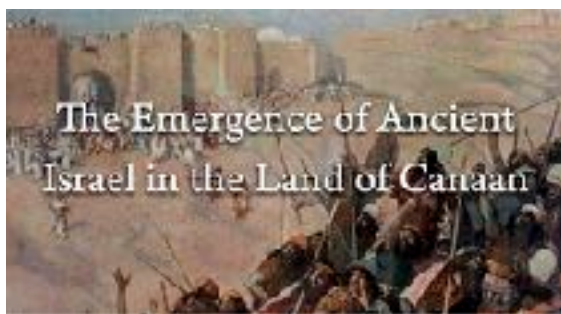
And if this story is not enough, we have several other similar stories.

The Roman soldier's servant being healed (Luke 7 and Matthew 8).

Jesus being outdebated by a Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15). A

Samaritan obeying the Torah more than a priest and Levite (Luke 10).

The reason these stories were shocking was because the Hebrews understood that they as a nation were favoured by God.



This nationalism justified a genocide committed in God's name against the Canaanites, the original inhabitants of what became known as the 'Holy Land'. Our own history in North America mirrors the arrogance of those who under God's banner feel justified to invade, steal from, and colonize the Native Americans. The Hebrews envisioned themselves as the best; they were the Chosen Ones; they were the people of the Covenant; they prophesied that *all* nations would gather and pay tribute to them. Yet, beginning with the prophets, this understanding of nationalism began to be challenged. With Jonah, the enemy, the Assyrians in Nineveh could be saved. The Persian king, Cyrus, could even be called a Messiah. And by the time we get to Jesus' era, the

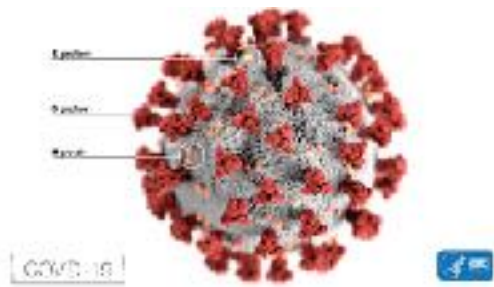
stories of foreigners' faithfulness caused the first century inhabitants of Jerusalem to squirm with intense discomfort!

You see, the story of the woman at the well and a half dozen other stories in our Christian scriptures were intended to disabuse the hearer or the reader that one race or nationality is *not* in God's eyes any more superior than another. Furthermore, that a Samaritan can then become a disciple or apostle of Jesus indicates that God's grace often dwells with the least likely.



[The above is sarcastic.]

The gospel message is that God's love for humanity is universal - transcending national borders. Furthermore, the story of the Jesus speaking to the woman at the well warns us all against national arrogance, patriotic hubris, and false collective narcissistic superiority-complex.



This week, we are worshipping in our separate dwelling places because of a contagion, COVID-19, otherwise known as the ‘Corona virus’. In this message, I aim to preach biblically, and thus theologically. And there is a strong biblical and theological link between COVID-19 and our story of the Jewish man and the Samaritan woman at the well.

Trump calls coronavirus a 'foreign virus' in Oval Office address

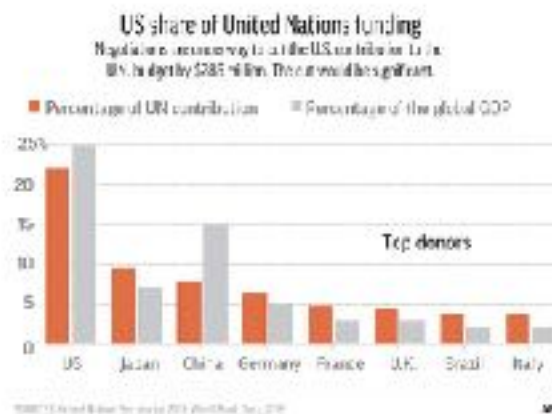
By Matt Wade, CNN
Updated 11:02 PM ET Wed March 11, 2020



Last week, I heard how the COVID-19 was described as a ‘foreign’ virus (note the ‘dog whistle’).² I heard a distinct an *emphasis* that the

² Tom Porter, *Business Insider*, “Trump Called the Coronavirus a ‘foreign virus’, part of a clear strategy to blame the pandemic on other places like China and Europe”, March 12, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-trump-foreign-virus-anti-migrant-policy-blame-china-europe-2020-3>, accessed March 16, 2020.

contagion came from China. I heard how Europe is at fault.³ There is a knee-jerk tendency to ban ‘others’ - be they Muslims, Latin Americans, or Europeans - to protect ‘us’. Five point seven (5.7) billion dollars is intended to be spent on a physical wall.⁴ Currently, foreign aid is not looked upon favourably.⁵



³ Erin Banco and Asawin Suebsaeng, *Daily Beast*, “Embattled Trump Blames Europe for Coronavirus in the U.S., Bans Travel”, March 12, 2020. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-bans-travel-from-europe-for-30-days-over-coronavirus>, accessed March 16, 2020.

⁴ Paul Specht, *Politifact*, Defending Trump's Request for Wall Funding, Congressman Inflates Foreign Aid Plan, January 24, 2020, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2019/jan/24/richard-hudson/defending-trumps-request-wall-funding-congressman-/>, accessed March 16, 2020.

⁵ Jeff Mason, *Reuters News*, “Trump Slashes Foreign Aid, Cuts Safety Net Programs in New Budget Proposal”, February 9, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-budget/trump-slashes-foreign-aid-cuts-safety-net-programs-in-new-budget-proposal-idUSKBN2030PV>, accessed March 16, 2020.

United Nations funding has long been targeted for diminishment.⁶

There are intentions to cut in half the funding to the World Health Organization.⁷



In 2018, the White House's Pandemic Response Team was disbanded.⁸

How helpful is our 'America First' policy in the midst of a pandemic?

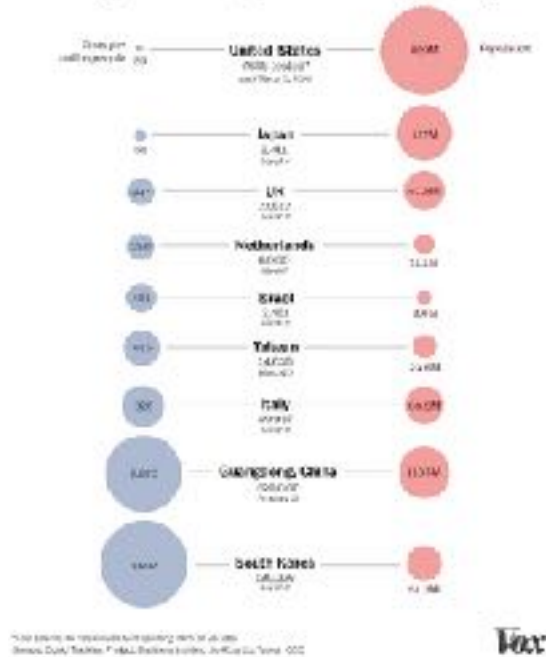
Last week I hear the constant refrain that United States' citizens are the best; we have the best; we are the best; and we have done the best; and we will do the best.

⁶ Robbie Gramer and Colum Lynch, *Foreign Policy*, "Trump Stealthily Seeks to Choke Off Funding to United Nations Programs", October 2, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/02/trump-stealthily-seeks-to-choke-off-funding-to-un-programs/>, accessed March 16, 2020.

⁷ Pia Gralki and Brandon Wiggins, *Global Citizen*, "The US Just Proposed Massive Cuts to Funding of World Health Organization", <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/trump-administration-budget-cuts-to-global-health/>, accessed March 16, 2020.

⁸ Beth Cameron, *The Washington Post* (Op Ed), "I Ran the White House Pandemic Office. Trump Closed It", March 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/nsc-pandemic-office-trump-closed/2020/03/13/a70de09c-6491-11ea-acca-80c22bbee96f_story.html, accessed March 16, 2020.

A snapshot of early Covid-19 testing per capita



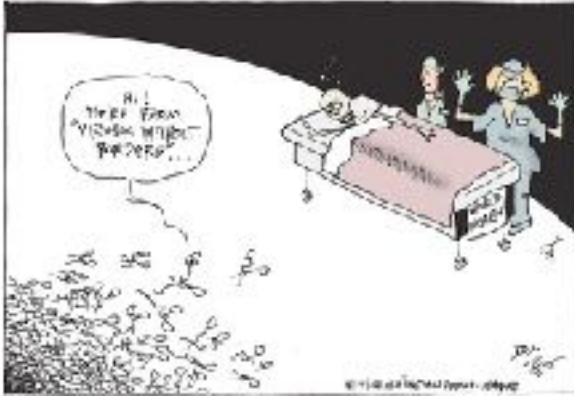
Yet, the United States is far from ‘the best’ when it comes to testing for COVID-19. We are not the best in terms of being able to supply ventilators, hospital beds, and ICU units, let alone hand-sanitizer and toilet paper (of which we currently seem to be unable to produce enough).⁹



This morning in the spirit of Lent, a season of introspection and repentance, I point-out that our nation is arrogant, it is boastful, and in word and deed it demonstrates gross and offensive hubris. We

⁹ NPR, “As the Pandemic Spreads, Will There be Enough Ventilators?”, March 14, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/14/815675678/as-the-pandemic-spreads-will-there-be-enough-ventilators>, accessed March 16, 2020.

routinely say we are the best when facts reveal that we are not. If we have the best health care system in the world, why are we ranked 33 out of 36 western (OECD) countries for infant mortality?¹⁰



Friends, viruses do not respect borders, and quite frankly, neither does God. All people, all humans, from all nations are created and loved by God. As a nation, as a people, we must stop claiming we are the best when we are not; we must stop blaming others; we must stop building walls and build-up our health care system; and we must work together with respect with all other nations of the world to fight this pandemic - and the next one after it.



¹⁰ United Health Foundation, America' Health Rankings Annual Report, 2018. <https://www.americashealthrankings.org/learn/reports/2018-annual-report/findings-international-comparison>, accessed March 16, 2020.

We live in a time of great anxiety, as we did before the United States' Civil War, during the 1918 Spanish Influenza, during the Great Depression, and in the early stages of World War II. We reorganized our economies and our society to meet the threats we faced. By practicing social distancing this morning, we work towards the recovery that I am sure that we will reach. I am so pleased that past week the executive branch cooperated, through the Treasury Department, with the legislative branch to pass economic assistance to those struggling with the illness until testing increases exponentially and a vaccine is developed. I have no doubt United States citizens will band together across partisan lines to care for the most vulnerable. The Bible compels us to care for the sick, elderly, poor, and children. That's not politics - that's theology.



The Bible also calls us as a nation to shed our bombastic arrogance and to abandon our hubris. Instead, we are to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk *humbly* with our God” (Micah 6:8). If the Samaritan woman at the well teaches us anything, it is that no one has a

monopoly on God and that God's blessings transcends races, religion, and national borders. So should our love.



Let me close by asking us a question that Roger Brown asked of me: "How can we as a congregation help out our members?" I am going to ask that I and Member Care provide leadership. We need to phone and visit regularly all of our elderly members. Even if we cannot enter nursing homes, we can (I believe) still leave at reception desks cards and gifts that express our love. We can cook and deliver meals to our most vulnerable members. We can help our most marginalized members attend their doctors' appointments. We who are healthy can go grocery shopping for others who have underlying health conditions.



In short, I advocate that we as church leaders divert our attention from cancelled events and meetings and instead schedule errands for

all in our congregation that are most negatively affected by social-distancing and the illnesses caused by COVID-19.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.