

***Swine Flu, or, Whatever Happened to Civility?***  
**Ephesians 3:13-21**  
**Sunday, September 20, 2009**

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen*

There is a virus these days that has reached epidemic proportions! The virus has no easy cure and no new vaccine is on the horizon. Wearing a mask does no good; washing your hands is ineffective; imagining you are immune is foolish. The virus strikes without warning. Noticeably it strikes the mouth, but since the mouth is wired to the heart and head researchers assume that the virus attacks the central nervous system. Symptoms are non-specific. A backbench chucklehead from South Carolina cries out “You Lie” at the president in a solemn joint session of Congress. An innocent passerby stops at a town hall meeting on health care reform and gets his finger bit off. A minister from Arizona prays that President Obama will get brain cancer like Ted Kennedy’s. The C.E.O. of Whole Foods stores writes an editorial espousing his libertarian and anti-government view of health care and 25,000 tweets on Facebook swear they will take his stores down. A football fan from Buffalo, New York after a loss by his team paints his displeasure on the lawn of a player who fumbled the ball in the closing minutes of the big game.

Need I go on? Can you supply more such stories – all from the past two weeks? I’m sure you can. Am I making a mountain out of a mole hill? Am I going too far supposing that we are experiencing an outbreak of social swine flu? Would I be wrong in saying we insult pigs by comparing them to the human behavior we are witnessing today?

Does anyone besides me want to stand up publicly and shout out, *Stop! Will everyone please get a life!?* I mean that. What I call social swine flu is a huge brain freeze. It causes people of all persuasions to suddenly believe that they are victims of other people’s opinions and shortcomings – elevating others to enemies in some sort of dark conspiracy. Then these self-declared victims believe they are entitled to slash and burn any representative target as though they were playing a video game. Missing are all notions of respect, open-minded listening and civil discourse that are the underpinnings of a healthy democracy – not to mention the traits of merciful and compassionate human beings.

Am I wrong?

Of course this is not a new thing in American history. Speaking of Congressional decorum, I looked up an incident I vaguely remembered from high school history class. On May 22, 1857, Senator Preston Brooks Smith, Democrat of South Carolina, enraged at an incendiary speech given by Senator Charles Sumner, Republican of Massachusetts, during the fierce debate slavery concerning the new state of Kansas – Senator Smith took a heavy walking stick and beat Senator Sumner almost to death on the Senate floor. Not only was Senator Brooks not rebuked officially, he was given by some of his colleagues a new gold-headed walking cane with the words *Hit 'em Again*, carved on it.

It's good history to recall. That era, the 1850's, was, like ours, a time of enormous social change focused on the question of whether the new state of Kansas should be slave or free. The debate had its own echo right here at South Church. According to the memoir of Dr. Buckingham, pastor of this church from 1847-1894, South Church was, when he arrived in 1847, conservative to the point of having a reputation of being pro-slavery. How things change! A mere ten years later (according to Dr. Buckingham) members of South Church took up a special church collection *to purchase rifles* and send them to the anti-slavery forces in Kansas. Imagine that! Talk about taking a political stand! Can you imagine what that debate might have sounded like right here in this church?

So social swine flu has returned today. Since 9/11, since the Great Recession of 2008, since the election of an African American President, we seem to have stirred up the ogres of xenophobia, misplaced class conflict and racial rage – never far from the surface in American life. People are afraid, not only of real problems, but of imagined enemies. And although I am a card-carrying liberal with occasional flashes of anarchist in me – I do not exempt my own left-leaning kind from the knee-jerk blaming that goes *Oink, Oink!* This swine flu knows no party preferences.

Here's my point. *There is a vaccine for this swine flu.* It's nothing new, though seldom practiced. And it only works when we start inoculating ourselves.

Do you know why we call ourselves a *Jesus-centered, Open and Affirming, Multi-racial church*? Because it's not enough to say we are Christian in some sort of generic niceness. If we are about inoculation against rage and fear, then we must be clear about what we stand on. We say we are rooted in Jesus, not in today's headlines. We say there are no strangers here. We say there are many parts but only one body. We say that people who never run across each other in their ordinary lives belong together here in this place. We say there is a breadth and length and height and depth to our God which is far more powerful than anything our politics can ask or imagine!

We know we are not perfect – far from it! We are a work-in-progress! But we are not victims. There is no boogeyman to fear – except ourselves when we forget the power of the God we have!

I say: Let us inoculate ourselves today against the virus of fear that diminishes all of us. Let us pray! Let us pray that we might be strengthened in our inner being with power through Jesus' own Spirit, and that he may dwell in our hearts through faith, *as we are*

*being rooted and grounded in love.* Let us pray that our willingness to put Jesus at our center and desire to openly affirm all his people will give us courage, compassion and mercy in hard times. Let us pray that if we inoculate ourselves with prayer, we will show that the swine flu of fear and rage need have no special power here – or anywhere.

Will you pray with me? Please take the prayer cards out again and say this cornerstone prayer with me. Let this be our inoculation. Let this be our faith. Let this be our life – and no other:

*We pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that we may be strengthened in our inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are being rooted and grounded in love. We pray that we may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now, to you, Lord, who are able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to you be the glory in the church and in Christ to all generations, forever and ever. Amen*

Let this prayer be our beginning and our end!