

John 3:14-21

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

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Again and Again: God Loves First

Today I would like to begin with a story about a man named Edward Jenner. Some of you might recognize his name, but all of you know his impact.

In 1796, Edward Jenner introduced a concept to medicine that changed the world forever. He provided a cure for one of the most intractable diseases known to humankind—before COVID, before AIDS, before the flu, there was smallpox.

This is a disease killed somewhere between 300 and 500 million people in the 20th Century alone. Throughout the 1700's in Europe, the disease killed an estimated 400,000 people per year.

There are even some medical writings about a smallpox-like disease that appear as early as 1500 BCE. And we also know that in Japan between the years of 735 and 737 CE, 2 years, the disease killed about a third of the population.

By some accounts, smallpox is believed to have killed more people than any other infectious disease in history. And the fatality rate of smallpox was around 30%. A third of all people who contracted it, died from it.

So, why is smallpox no longer wiping out a third of our population? Well, Edward Jenner found a cure for this disease when he discovered another virus that was very similar to smallpox, but nowhere near as harmful. The virus is called vaccinia, and it was used to teach the body how to defeat smallpox.

You see, when the smallpox virus was introduced to the body, it was processed as a threat but it was too strong for the immune system to act and defeat it before the virus took over. It destroyed the body before the body was able to destroy it. This is why introducing a similar, but weaker virus, was so effective at stopping smallpox.

You see, when the body encountered the vaccinia virus, it was able to defeat it, and not only that, through this battle, the body learned how to defeat the smallpox virus. So that once it came into contact with smallpox, but body immediately knew what to do. The immune system didn't have to take the time to figure it out, thus it was able to defeat the smallpox virus before it took over.

Okay, so y'all know I'm a science nerd, so I obviously think this is the coolest thing ever. But I am not just up here sharing for fun. There is a reason! I think it incredibly profound that the cure to this devastating disease was not found in a sophisticated virus destroying contraption that Jenner or another scientist devised in a lab.

Instead, the cure was always in the body. The body always had the tools needed to defeat the virus, it was just a matter of the body learning how to use those tools.

Our modern-day vaccines follow this concept. Though for the most part, scientists no longer use a weaker version of a virus. They have learned that there are different protein structures in viruses, that when destroyed render the virus ineffective.

So, scientists can either introduce those proteins to the body, which are harmless to the body, but the body still sees them as invaders, so it quickly learns how to destroy them. Thus, when the actual virus comes into contact with the body, the body already knows how to destroy those protein, thus the body already knows how to defeat the virus.

This is essentially how many of the vaccines used to defeat COVID work. They teach the body how to destroy those little spikes that are on the surface of the SARS virus, which ultimately render it ineffective. The virus is no longer able to take over the body, which is why doctors are telling us that we may still contract the virus, we may still get a little sick, but once we've had the vaccine, our bodies are way better equipped to fight COVID, thus we are less likely to have severe illness or die as a result of infection.

Okay...this sermon is definitely part Public Service Announcement, Part Science Lesson...but I'm also trying to build to a theological and pastoral message.

The cure to any virus known to humankind has always been found in the body. The body often needs a little help, an inoculation, a vaccine, a lesson that aids the body in doing what the body was created to do. I find this to be so beautiful and so profound.

And it is through this scientific lens that I have come to read this text from John, about Jesus being lifted up like the serpent. Which is a reference to the bizarre and complicated story which Kate read for us from the book of Numbers.

The cure for the deadly snakebite was to look upon a snake made of bronze. It's an inoculation of sorts. The cure to this plague of snakes was not to remove the source of the affliction, to remove the snakes, but to introduce the body to the threat in a way that allowed the body to process it and to become whole and well again with the tools already present in the body.

By body here, I obviously mean both the physical, individual bodies of the people, as well as the collective body of the people Israel, wandering the wilderness, constantly complaining and bickering. In need of assurance, in need of conflict resolution, in need of wholeness as a people.

I read this story through this lens for a few reasons, because I love science and I love bodies. I think we should take every opportunity we can to revel in the beauty and the goodness of our bodies.

And because I have come to find a lot of consolation in the idea that Jesus likens himself to a kind of inoculation, which when lifted up, when gazed upon, he becomes the cure for our own affliction.

As he is the Word become flesh. The incarnate God, who saw it good to dwell with us as one of us. He becomes the vaccine that teaches us how to become whole again.

God sends God's son to teach the world how to become whole again. The cure cannot be found in removing that which afflicts creation, because I'm pretty sure we can all agree that the affliction is us. We are the virus, infecting and destroying the world. And instead of removing us, something I sometimes think could be justified, God chooses instead to give us a vaccine to teach our bodies how to do the thing our bodies were created to do from the beginning.

Our cure is found by looking upon Christ, lifted up like the serpent to remind us that our bodies and beings were created and called good. That our bodies, our individual, physical bodies, and the bodies of people, the holy communities into which we are gathered, all these bodies contain the tools we need to become good and whole and healthy again, the way we were created to be.

We just oftentimes need a little bit of time, a little bit of instruction, a little reminder of how to use those tools for true healing and wholeness for our individual and our collective bodies.

Christ lifted up is not a tool to remove that which afflicts us...which would mean us or anyone we decided was the source of our affliction. Christ lifted up is an inoculation that teaches us how to become whole.

The great irony about John's gospel, is that it seems to me that John himself missed the whole point.¹ Now hang with me here, because this is important and I'm almost done.

John's gospel has historically been used and is currently used to exclude those who "don't believe." Those who don't proclaim Jesus as Christ. Those who don't subscribe to the same understanding of family values. Those who worship differently. Who act differently. Who look or dress different. Those whom the body has decided, because of their difference, are the source of affliction and thus must be cast out.

John's gospel is the foundation for anti-Semitism, throughout the millennia, and even today. I was recently mailed a special version of the Bible, which only included John's gospel and Paul's letter to the Romans.

This is the most important tool of White Supremacy and White Christian Nationalism in our world today. If you are different, then you must either change to conform to the body, or be cast out. Forget the gifts, the wisdom, the tools which God has given you for the purpose of healing the body.

Because the body has decided that you are the affliction and you must be cast out. And to just bring it home, my friends, one of the most destructive ways this is playing out in our society today is through the anti-Asian rhetoric being espoused by some of the most influential people in our nation.

Rhetoric that has led to violence, intimidation, and terrifying trauma to people of Asian descent in our country. Hate crimes against people of Asian descent are up 150%.

We are continuing to struggle in a worldwide pandemic. The body is suffering. And the answer for some, built on the foundation that is John's gospel, is to isolate and blame and cast out.

And I am here to tell you, my friends, that part of the reason I love Scripture so very much is because even when human beings, like John, in spite of their own prejudice and trauma, which leads them to work exclusionary theology into the very Word of God, in spite of this, God's true intention and grace shines forth.

For God so loved the world that God's son, not to condemn but to save the world. God sent God's son and in God's son being lifted up, humans are invited to gaze upon

¹ Gratitude to Paul C. Shupe for his "Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B. For his encouragement to preachers to challenge John on his exclusionary theology.

this act of self-sacrificial, vulnerable love, which has the power to redeem and restore all of Creation, because this love teaches us, reminds us, shows us how to be the body we were created to be from the beginning.

Not a body that names beloved children of God as a source of affliction needing to be expelled, but as a body full of diverse members, each with particular gifts and insights and wisdom to be offered for the good of the whole.

For God so loved the world, for God so loves us, that God is able to see past all of our failings, our grumblings, our brokenness, and see the goodness and the beauty that is in each of us.

For God so loved the world, that God decided to go to great lengths, to lift Christ up for us to gaze upon him, that we might also see that goodness and beauty within us. Within all of us. And that learning this all together is what will bring us true healing.

For God so loved the world, that God sent God's son, not to condemn but to save us all. In the name of this Triune God who Creates, Redeems, and Sustains all of Creation. Amen.