

“IT’S A BIG, SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL,” A sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, February 7, 2021

Last week I heard something that shook my world. On cable television I heard an interview with public health and infectious disease expert Dr. Michael Osterholm from the University of Minnesota. He was discussing the latest Covid-19 strains now arriving on American shores from Brazil, Kenya, and South Africa. These new strains are different, more highly communicable and even lethal than what we’ve already experienced in the United States so far. Osterholm predicts the South African Covid-19 strain will become dominant across our nation within the next two to three months. Our present vaccine program will likely provide some protection. But perhaps not total. A special booster shot geared to this latest strain may be necessary.

If that wasn’t concerning enough, what Osterholm said next disturbed me more—yes, shook up my world. Covid-19, he warned, could continue to mutate in dangerous ways for us all if the global spread remains rampant. As more and more people become infected across the globe—and possibly infected more than once—the greater the chance of fresh, dangerous mutations. The only way to halt the hazards of Covid-19 and all its possible strains is to vaccinate the world. This is a global pandemic. The infection rate in every other country of the world can have consequences, good or bad, for us here. There is, Osterholm made clear, no escaping that fact.

“Wow!” I thought to myself. We’re having enough trouble rolling out vaccinations right here in the United States. And we have to be concerned about vaccinating the whole world?

The 16th century Christian poet John Donne once declared that “no man is an island.” Here in the United States we are discovering anew through this pandemic that no nation is either. Of course, we should have known this already. In the 20th century, America fought two world wars. In our present century the terrorist attacks on 9/11 further underscored that we are not impregnable. Terrible violence came home to us. In recent decades we have experienced wave upon wave of refugees, fleeing from violence, political turmoil, and poverty elsewhere, seeking asylum in our country. And then there has been the challenge of global warming, often exacerbated not only by our own negligence but also the behavior of other nations on the other side of the globe. The destruction of the Amazon rain forest in Brazil, for instance, is impacting rainfall patterns thousands of miles away with a resulting loss of arable land for agriculture. Higher seas from Arctic and Antarctic ice melt threaten to put major portions of countries around the globe under water. Hundreds of thousands of residents of a low-lying country like Bangladesh already have to flee their homes annually due to rising tides that displace them. Coastal cities of the United States like New York and Washington, D.C., are likely to

face more and more flooding over the next decade and more, particularly as hurricanes sweep in.

Yet, against this backdrop, I think the present pandemic represents an even greater watershed, making more crystal clear than ever that our world has become even smaller than we might ever have imagined possible. And just like those so-called “hundred year” floods that now seem to happen every seven to ten years in big river areas of America, we could see global pandemics recurring more frequently than ever before in human history.

You could say that we brought this latest problem on ourselves. Trade and travel are more global than ever. Consider this. When I was growing up high school kids took a senior trip to Washington, D.C. If their parents were more permissive, they were actually allowed to drive down to Florida for a week. Now our high school seniors vacation in Cancun, Mexico or islands of the Caribbean without batting an eye lash. Or at least they did so before the pandemic. In lieu of camping trips up north, or seeing the USA in a Chevrolet, other folks now take their own Caribbean cruises or jet to even more far-flung, exotic places, almost without a second thought. In fact, we have become so compulsive in our travel habits that it has been hard to forego them even when the risk of continuing with them in a pandemic is known and considerable. Will any of this change if and when the danger of the pandemic finally fades or ceases? I suspect not. It’s a big, small world out there and there’s something strong in us that feeds the desire to see it all—or as much as we can.

The world economy is also now networked as never before. Just look at the labels on our clothing. Or the place of origin marks on just about anything else we buy at Wal-Mart or anywhere else. We’re now used to out-of-season fruit flown in daily from Guatemala, Chile, Israel, and South Africa--just as Mexico gets just about all its beans from Michigan. What this means is that political and social turmoil in other parts of the world can also impact us. We are wise to be concerned about how people elsewhere on the globe are living because their well-being—economic, social, and health-wise--can now have unprecedented ramifications for us.

Yes, we can talk about America first. We can give vent to all kinds of nostalgia about the way things were. We certainly need to be concerned about all dimensions of well-being of our own citizens, beginning with good paying jobs. But untampered and unruly, our America-first rhetoric can actually be dangerous. Ultimately, as Christian men and women and citizens of America, we all have to confront and deal with what is, rather than what was.

At the time that the United States, eager to end the war against Imperial Japan, dropped atomic bombs on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, leveling both Japanese cities, Albert

Einstein whose understanding of physics contributed to the development of atomic weaponry sagely declared: "Everything has changed but the way men think." Einstein's essential message here was that in the new atomic age, we need to start thinking in new ways or, otherwise, could end up destroying ourselves, rendering our planet uninhabitable and human life more desperate and miserable. The corollary to Einstein's message was a call to global peacemaking and peace-keeping, in line with the Old Testament psalmist who counsels us: "Turn away from evil, do good; seek peace and pursue it." (*Psalms 34:14*)

One of Einstein's contemporaries, the British historian Arnold Toynbee, had his own warning about what happens when societies like our own don't change how they think and adapt to what is. They end up facing what Toynbee called "a time of troubles." Wallowing in illusions, these societies keep looking to the past for ready answers and solutions to their present dilemmas. But this doesn't work or at least becomes very complicated when the challenges at hand are completely unprecedented. And this, friends, is what's happening today when the dimensions of our problems, really are global in a way never before seen. This is true whether we are talking about climate or pandemic or economics. Because our problems are global, we have start thinking globally.

I don't know if you ever thought about it, but Jesus was a globalist or a global thinker. While fellow Jews kept admonishing Jesus to stick to his own kind, limiting his ministry to the Jewish community exclusively and the neighborhood of Jerusalem, he refused to do so. It was a big, small world out there and Jesus was bold enough to acknowledge it again and again and again. Although he was keenly aware of the prejudices of the day, in his own healing, preaching, and teaching, Jesus made no hard and fast distinctions between male and female, abled and disabled, or Jew and gentile. As the son of God who created this entire cosmos, Jesus loved all men and women without prejudice or wanton, selfish discrimination. That love knew no arbitrary, man-made borders.

Remember how Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion? (*Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10*) And halting the bleeding of a Syro-Phoenician or Lebanese woman, Jesus actually commended the gal for her faith. (*Mark 5:34*) Rather boldly, he called a despised Roman tax collector to apostleship. Then there was that moment when he sat and conversed so freely with a divorced Samaritan woman at the well though other Jews would have only treated her with contempt. (*John 4:4-26*) He went on to commend the charity of another Samaritan who set a good example for us all by aiding a stranger way-laid by robbers. (*Luke 10:25-33*) Even more marvelously, Jesus restored sight to the blind who were supposedly being punished by God as too morally unfit in their essential nature to read scripture. (*John 9:1-9*) Likewise, with the touch of Jesus' hand and his spoken words of

prayer, long-ostracized lepers were restored to health and full participation in the community. (*Luke 17:11-19*)

At every turn, there was an incredible world-inclusiveness to Jesus' ministry. Of course, this is what got him into trouble. Yes, this is what got him killed. Do you remember the scene at Jerusalem's Great Temple where Jesus overturns the tables of the money-exchangers and pigeon-sellers? One of Jesus' complaints is that the powers that be had made the Temple into a profit center. Quite properly, he condemned the Temple operation as a den or "hideout of thieves." (*Mark 11:17*) Yet Jesus had another major complaint also. The Temple leadership was acting as if they owned the place when it was actually the house of God. Accordingly, rather than just serving the Jewish nation, the Temple needed to be a place of welcome for all God's children. Citing the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah, Jesus proclaims: "My Temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of *all* nations." (*Mark 11:17; Isaiah 56:7*)

Not surprisingly, the political, social, and religious establishment of that day was profoundly threatened by Jesus' faithful, biblically-informed vision, which was reinforced by the direct inspiration and leading of God. Jesus' arrest, mock trial, and crucifixion followed quickly. But, as we all know, those narrow-minded authorities of Jerusalem and Rome did not have the final say. Instead, Jesus and God did. After his resurrection, Jesus began appearing to his apostles and disciples, reminding them of his radically inclusive message. When it finally came time for Jesus to ascend to heaven, he reiterated his global vision for all time, for all to hear. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he proclaimed. "Go, therefore," he continued, "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commended to you, and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (*Matthew 28:18-20*)

In an earlier era, our Christian churches with their profound commitment to missionary outreach used to imbued with a deep and abiding globalist perspective. We were not only committed to sharing the gospel but reaching out also in generous humanitarian caring as tangible evidence of the love that Christ calls us to have for all. This is the Christian example and model that are more important than ever and which Christians like ourselves need to rediscover and recover. Indeed, our nation as a whole needs to be thinking in this way with globally-minded Christians as the leaven for this more broad-minded perspective and understanding. If we don't start thinking and acting more globally again, the problems besetting our world are going to literally and figuratively swamp us because they have no borders and only very limited local solutions.

Who can know God's will for us in its entirety? Yet, going back to God's commandment in the Old Testament Book of Genesis where he calls us to be "fruitful and multiply,"

subduing the earth, it appears to be our destiny as a human race to be linked together in ways that once we could hardly have imagined. (*Genesis 1:28*) How important it is for us to trust that the loving God proclaimed by Jesus Christ stands with us in the ebb and flow of it all, in the mix and mingling of people that is already happening and is yet to come.

At a very pivotal moment in American history midway through the 20th century, the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King preached a sermon entitled “Chaos—or Community?” It was a question. The point Dr. King made was that the only way we can avoid chaos when confronted by crisis is to reaffirm and rebuild our community, remembering that in Christ, our fellow men and women are our brothers. Until God’s kingdom comes, we have a moral responsibility to love and care for our fellow men and women in the spirit of Christ. It is through our unselfish love that Christ can best call others to salvation.

Congregation, at Disney World in Florida, which I visited with my son when he was a kid, there is a ride called “It’s a Small World After All.” After all these years, the musical tune that goes with that Disney ride still chimes in my brain. It’s a bright, happy ditty, encouraging us in its own way to see ourselves as diverse citizens of one planet. The graphic headlining our order of service for this morning is also borrowed from that Disney ride. Who can disagree that our world has gotten in some very real senses smaller? But our globe remains a vast geographical expanse with big problems. It’s really a big, small world, isn’t it? How important, then, that in the face of this very real paradox we are truly Christ-minded, rather than small-minded or narrow-minded. May our faith in God and openness to all that Christ teaches give us the courage and fortitude of spirit to face what is and to work together with others across the globe for shared benefit and the common good. In Jesus Christ, **Amen**.