Got the Summertime Pandemic Blues

There is an old rock n roll song from Eddie Cochran that was released in July of 1958, “Summertime Blues”. Basically, the song is a lament of a young man who is encountering adulthood in the midst of summer; he misses all the things he could do in earlier summers. I have been humming it a fair amount recently, not just for the changes in my life circumstances, but for everyone’s life changes. As a nation, we are in the midst of pandemic fatigue and our natural responses to it. We are not used to staying the course this long, especially when there is no particular way that we can respond. During World War II, our parents/grandparents/great-grandparents focused on growing Victory gardens, making first aid kits to be donated, collecting scrap metal and other such activities. These activities made the wait in this “in-between”, or luminal, time tolerable. Pandemic fatigue takes its greatest toll when the effects of those distractions no longer help. We are tired; we are not working efficiently, we are worried or scared, and we have no real knowledge of the path this virus has put us on. The natural response is to say, “I am sick and tired of this, I am done with following all these rules that don’t make sense to me.” It is much like the young man in the song: we are called into being a new way and cannot yet see a clear path, but certainly feel the pain of the change. This change causes feelings of fear, anger, grief, confusion and frustration.

Our ancestors in prior pandemics felt this and responded in ways with which we can now empathize. Blaming others for the continuation of the disease has been unfortunately popular throughout the centuries. Believing in human-made “miracle cures” is another popular response. When the experts have to change course and their teachings based on new information, many will no longer believe their teachings. Then there is the bad theology that if we believe sincerely enough, the virus will have no effect on us: “I am covered in the blood of Jesus” is why one churchgoer early in the pandemic believed that she would not get COVID-19. But how we respond in our current circumstances can make every difference to others. I am not talking just about the core principle of radical hospitality of caring for our neighbors by following public health teachings, even when they change. I am talking about how we respond to those feelings of fear, anger, grief, confusion and frustration. How do we tap into Christ’s love for us, mourn but not cling to the losses in our lives and learn to trust God and others, even when we cannot visualize tomorrow?

This same spiritual work is necessary in other parts of our society. One of the outcomes of this pandemic is we can no longer ignore some of the injustices that are based on the common cultural assumptions. For most of us, and many parts of the country, encountering law enforcement is positive and reaffirms law enforcement’s code of “To Serve and To Protect”. But we now see that our social assumptions have caused people to have very different experiences; it has created its own unending pandemic of injustice and death. Some in law enforcement have viewed people they interact with as “less than”, especially if their skin color is black or brown or they are from “the wrong part of town” or they are attracted to or are the “wrong” gender. While we know these violent interactions with law enforcement are wrong, we tend to sweep them away from our conscience, because we can. But as people who claim to follow Jesus, Black Lives Matter is the rallying cry that should embolden all of us to look at how we react to differences within ourselves and within our human society. Many of us were taught from the time we were little that certain people, certain groups of people are “less than” and are to be feared. This is nothing new in our society. And our rallying cry is similar to those from the Civil Rights marches, and those that fought to free people from slavery. The challenge is that this work of changing people’s hearts and minds and replacing their fears, their anger, their grief, confusion and frustration with God’s love, hope, trust and reconciliation is hard work and with no clear path. The work can have its own pandemic fatigue. But this is the work of the Gospel; this is the ministry that God has called each who claims our baptism in the blood of Christ. It is not that we are protected in this life from all ills and dangers, but that if we follow Christ to the very end of our lives, we will have brought others into the Light of Christ. Stay the course, believe in the love of Christ, go and make disciples of all nations.