

5/22/20

Namaske: the mask I wear to honor your health recognizes the mask you wear to honor mine.

In Bible Study this week (Give it a try! Thursdays at 10am—no experience expected), we got into a conversation about the presence of God deep within us. It's a heady concept, and each of us has our own degree of comfort and relationship with an intuitive sense of Spirit. This relationship may wax and wane throughout the course of our lives. The Church and society's level of comfort in acknowledging or endeavoring to control individuals' claim on our innate wisdom and compassion ebbs and flows as well. We see this in many ways, and it is a challenge of human community and evolution.

Wisdom's innate presence was a common topic of teaching and conversation in the early Jesus movement. We hear this, for example, in the book of James:

19 Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. 20 ...welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.

25 ...there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it.

27 True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the [Holy Parent], is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us. (Excerpted from James 1:19-27 Common English Bible (CEB) translation)

For those of us who are not (yet!) mystics, or perfectly realized in our embodiment of Christ, this is a wonderful, bite-sized, practical teaching. To practice devotion and connect with the Spirit of God, live in a way that cares for the most vulnerable (In James' time, this was the widow and orphan, who were left without familial or societal support to fend for themselves.). Concrete practices can be acts of spiritual devotion, of embodied prayer. For me, in our historic moment, this speaks of wearing masks.

There is such a kerfuffle in our nation about masks. This is not new to human history, it turns out. Masks were first used in the days of the Bubonic plague. Doctors wore weird, Gonzo (the Muppet)-looking masks with herbs stuffed into the snouts in the belief that not smelling the odor of illness would protect the wearer from contagion. In 1878, Dr. A.J. Jessup suggested wearing a cotton mask for protection of doctors and patients against what they were beginning to understand about bacteria's role. He was ridiculed. In 1905, Dr. Alice Hamilton recommended masks for surgery teams. Slowly, mask usage became more common in medical treatment. It was not until 1910 that masks came into general use to protect people from plague: In Manchuria, Dr. Wu Lien Teh realized that contagion of the plague could move through the air. He was rejected roundly, by older, whiter, doctors, but his most vocal detractor lost the argument dramatically by dying of the plague two days after visiting patients without a mask. Other doctors learned the lesson, began wearing masks, and the plague was ended in just over six months. When the Spanish Flu pandemic surfaced a century ago, citizens and medical professionals remembered, and mask usage finally became common to manage the pandemic. In China, mask-wearing has

continued as a cultural gesture of caring for others by protecting the people around you. I have long wondered why the Chinese are so often photographed wearing masks while engaged in common tasks. It turns out it is a practice of doing your part for the common good.

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In this historic moment in the world, wearing a mask may be one of the most powerful mindfulness practices we may engage. Why are some of us so quick to ridicule and so slow to respond with empathy and love? Perhaps a deeper practice of recognizing the Spirit of God within us—caring for those most vulnerable, and encouraging one another in small, practical ways—in addition to easing this health crisis, may help our collective evolution. At the least, it will show us who is who (and who then we may pray for!). Rather than an infringement on our rights, as some are crowing, mask-wearing is a spiritual practice of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Perhaps we should start affirming those who are, kindly and lovingly, following this practice with the phrase I recently saw in a meme: “Namaste!” (The mask I wear to honor your health recognizes the mask you wear to honor mine.)

Love & Blessings,

Heather