

# Covid, Canceling, and a Culture of Compassion

*A sermon on Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2 by Nathan Nettleton, 8 August 2021*

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## Message

We live in amidst a culture of highly toxic, self-righteous, finger-pointing. Jesus calls us to a radical love which will stop the blame game but still speak transforming truth to those who oppress.

## Sermon

Well, here we are in lockdown number 6, and the thing that many people find most depressing is that no one knows the answer to the question, “Six of how many?” If we knew that it was number six of seven, or even six of ten, we could more readily brace ourselves for what was still to come and ride on through it. It is the not-knowing that drives us mad.

All down through history, plagues and pandemics have caused social crises that were far more than just medical problems, and our fearful reactions to the not-knowing is what generates most of the wider crises. We tend to do two things, and we do both of them badly. We try to reassert control where we feel we’ve lost control, and we try to assign blame and punish the guilty.

Some of our attempts to reassert control are just funny – like panic buying toilet paper each time a lockdown is announced. “I might not be able to control a lot of scary things about this lockdown, but at least I’ve taken control of my own toilet paper supply.” Whatever makes you feel better?!

Other attempts have much more serious consequences. Like those who try to solve the “six of how many?” question by saying, “That’s it. We can’t have any more lockdowns. We’ve just got to open up and learn to live with covid.” That might not be a big deal if the likes of you or I say it, but when senior politicians and powerful business leaders say it, the consequences can get pretty serious.

Our attempts to assign blame and punish the guilty are equally messy. Each state points the finger at some other state, and sooner or later find the fingers pointing back at them. Suburbs and social classes look suspiciously at one another, and the suspicion only contributes to the problem. We point the finger at politicians a lot, blaming them for the stuff-ups in vaccine roll-outs and quarantine security and the timing of lockdowns, and sure, lots of those things have been stuffed up majorly. But truth be told, we mostly put them in a no-win situation to start with. Whatever systems they put in place, lots of us don’t cooperate, and any system is only as foolproof as the fools who think it doesn’t apply to them.

A crisis like the pandemic does strange things to existing divisions and hostilities in the community. As we have seen in this case, there is often a brief hopeful improvement, and then a dramatic worsening of the situation. At the start of this pandemic, there was a lot of hopeful talk about the end of the culture wars, because here was a challenge that faced us all equally, regardless of which sides we were on in the various contested social issues.

For a little while, we did seem to unite in the face of this common unseen enemy, but before long the old hostilities found new footholds in the new crisis. In America, wearing a mask or not came to be seen as a politically partisan identity statement. In Australia, politicians milked

our infatuation with border control to play one state off against another in the quest for political brownie points. New South Wales gloated about how its gold standard procedures would protect it from ever having to do a hard lockdown like those failures south of the border, and then wondered why their people didn't feel inclined to cooperate with the hard lockdown they were told they would never have to have.

Meanwhile, after their brief lull, the so called culture wars seem to have just ramped up and are consuming more and more victims. The best attended press conference of the whole Olympics was for a weightlifter who came dead last after failing to make a single successful lift, but who was huge news because she is transgender. Her participation is governed by well developed rules, and it is a sport that is contested in weight divisions so her size confers no advantage, but her mere presence reopens all the arguments and hostility runs free.

In generations past, before any scientific understanding of viruses and how they are spread, the differences between the medical aspects of a pandemic and the social and economic fallout were mostly not recognised. People were dying, fear was spreading, businesses were collapsing, and people were fighting, and it was all just one big crisis. The usual solution in those days was a large scale finger-pointing, not unlike our own, but usually more successful. The affected population would sooner or later unite around one theory of who was to blame. The Jews had poisoned the water, or those troublesome unmarried women in the town were witches bringing down curses, or perhaps the king was identified as the culprit. The unity and euphoria generated by the lynching didn't, of course, stop the virus, but it usually succeeded in resolving, at least for a while, much of the surrounding social crisis so people simply experienced a great improvement, and the virus passed in time as well.

But that doesn't work anymore, partly because we now all know it's a lie, and also because some of the divisions in our society have become so deeply entrenched, and so partisan or tribal, that we no longer have any chance of even agreeing on who to all point the finger at. An awful lot of finger pointing still goes on though, and the more divided up we are, the more hostile groups there are pointing fingers at one another.

In modern Western society, the finger pointing doesn't usually end in physical violence and killings, although the January 6 insurrection in Washington is an obvious exception, and so are the ongoing black deaths in custody. But even when there is no literal bloodshed, we still see clear examples of outraged finger-pointing that incites a frenzied mob to destroy some accused guilty party. Social media has given this a new form: the mob piles on demanding that someone be sacked, or that their work be boycotted, or that they be exposed, hated, shamed and shunned. New form, but it is the same old phenomenon that has been going on for millennia, and which always gets a bit more frenzied in times of pandemic or social trauma. The same old phenomenon that saw Jesus strung up on a cross by a jeering mob.

Actually, the new form usually has a new trigger too. Nowadays, the ones we persecute are almost always persecuted because they are alleged to be persecutors. We unite in anger against these persecutors on behalf of the victims. Anyone who can be shown to have done or said something that was offensive or hurtful towards some recognisable group of victims becomes fair game for the angry mob. And it is so much easier to throw the first stone when you can do it anonymously on social media.

This trend of championing the victims is genuinely new. Some of the readings we've been hearing at Morning Prayer in the last few weeks remind us of how little anyone used to care about the victims. The ancient kings and their armies could slaughter and kill, and no one ever appealed to the rights of the victims. Nowadays, our eyes have been opened and we care a great deal about the victims, which is a very good thing. But like many very good things, we soon manage to corrupt it.

Our massive new concern for the victims has recently reached a tipping point that has suddenly made it attractive, for the first time in history, to be seen as a victim. And now we are all competing with one another to be recognised as the most deserving of victim status, to be the one whose rights will be fought for and whose needs will be provided for and whose hurts will be avenged.

But the short attention span of social media means that yesterdays celebrity victims are quickly erased from our awareness and some new cause arises to take their place, only to be replaced itself in a day or two, if not a few hours.

Strangely, for all our supposed concern for the victims, this has actually made us even worse at really listening to each other and understanding why one another is hurt. If we are rivals, both seeking the same attention as victims, we become hyper-aware of other people's privilege and power, and extremely blind to our own. So, to use a really common example, if women start talking about men's patriarchal and sexist behaviour, the men will only be able to see how far the scales have recently tipped against them and feel themselves victimised. Both sides are probably right.

Nowadays, white heterosexual men can feel that they have become a uniquely despised and excluded minority, and in some contexts, they actually are. Whichever divide we are talking about, both sides have an exaggerated view of their own disadvantage and an exaggerated view of the other's privilege and power, and it makes it almost impossible for either to hear the other.

Furthermore, the cycle of outrage and tribal identity makes it taboo to even listen to the other side and allow any credence to anything they say, and if you break that taboo, you will more than likely find the fingers turning around and pointing at you, and you'll be buried under the next social media pile-on. How can we build bridges in a society that makes it taboo to even see the other side as worthy of being listened to?

This has now become so toxic that it seems to be producing a pandemic of mental health fragility. Maybe my perception is distorted by living in a building with 100 university students, but it seems especially evident in this generation that has grown up with the internet and social media. Huge numbers of them are terribly fragile and crippled by anxiety, and I think I understand why. All their lives they've seen the cycle of outrage spinning, turning yesterday's universal assumptions into tomorrow's proof of moral failure; yesterday's lame joke into tomorrow's grounds for a social media lynching. They know that nothing but dumb luck keeps anyone ahead of it, and so they live with the paralysing fear that the next turn could see everyone turning on them, as the new puritanism, just like the old, gets another new sin in its sights, and offenders are shamed and shunned.

Where am I going with all this. Good question. This has turned into a very long introduction to an otherwise very short sermon. In fact I've preached whole sermons that were shorter than that introduction!

But listen now to some of the words that we heard earlier from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Outrage culture and social media shaming certainly weren't on Paul's radar, but when you hear his words juxtaposed against what I have just said, you'd be forgiven for thinking they might have been.

Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Jesus has forgiven you.

In the face of a culture of bitterness and wrath and anger, the Apostle calls us to build instead a culture of kindness. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Jesus has forgiven you."

Probably the easiest line for us to overlook in our modern age is the line that says, "do not make room for the devil." The name given to the devil in our Bibles is *The Satan*, which means the accuser, or the prosecutor. A culture of constant vengeful outrage that points the accusing finger at another and another and another *is* the room that we make for the devil. That toxic culture of fear and accusation that hides our own sins under our frenzied puritanical pursuit of the sins of others is precisely what the Bible labels as satanic.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Jesus has forgiven you."

There is, of course, an equal and opposite mistake, which Paul also wants to warn us against; a mistake where tenderhearted turns into soft-headed, and we become reluctant to ever express an opinion or question anyone's behaviour. No, says Paul. "Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger."

We are members of one another, and we love one another, so it is actually our job to call one another to grow, to let go of bitterness and resentment, and to grow into the image of Jesus. If you love me, and you see me trapped in my own blindness, blundering around wounding others, then get angry about it and put away falsehood and speak truth to me. Lovingly but firmly call me out on my behaviour and show me the damage I'm doing so I can grow up. There is all the difference in the world between gathering around me in love to challenge me to repent and grow up, and pointing the finger at me in outrage and calling on the frenzied mob to vengefully shame and shun me.

Friends, we live in a world that is more toxic, divided, puritanical and vengeful by the day. The Covid pandemic didn't create any of that, but it did bring some of it out into the open

where we might more readily recognise it for what it is. Jesus calls us to break free from that culture by embodying among ourselves the alternative culture of radical love that is the kingdom of God. So let's challenge and stir each other on to put away all bitterness and wrath and vengefulness and accusation, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Jesus has forgiven you. Yes, as God in Jesus has forgiven you.