



### COVID 19: Outflanked by the Goodness of God

*The work of ministry is to render the virus as penultimate,  
to see that even its lethal force is outflanked by the goodness of God.*

--Walter Brueggemann

Raul was tending to the lawn and small garden in front of his family's single-story apartment as we pulled up with "Dorothy," our Catholic Worker truck. The yard, decorated with a couple of pumpkins, some planted bright yellow flowers, and a "Happy Fall" decorated yard sign, was a welcoming site. I paused a second to take in the hope, the goodness of God, that this well cared for yard offered. I marveled at the beauty contained in that tiny fragile yard, a beauty that belied the reality of Raul's family's struggle in not having enough food to eat.

Raul greeted us with a smile. "Hi," he said excitedly, seeing the boxes of food inside Dorothy's truck bed. Raul's family is one of the many families that receive weekly food deliveries from the St. Benedict Catholic Worker. The need for food and essentials has grown at an alarming rate since the start of this virus. According to a November 2020 MSNBC report, the situation in the United States is dire. The news network reported that in the United States of America *1 in 8 families go to bed hungry*, 14,600,000 people have lost their medical insurance since COVID began, *8 million more families are living at or below the US Government poverty line*, and *40 million people are facing homelessness*. Here in our own community, Fresno County, *239,784 people, 24% of Fresno County's total population of 999,101, cannot put food on the table*.

The COVID 19 Virus continues to take its toll particularly on the most vulnerable--the elderly, the sick, the poor, people of color, those living on the street, the underemployed and the unemployed, those without medical care, and those without resources. These are the people that Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York has said, "are paying the highest price and suffering the most in this time of COVID 19." Those suffering are our neighbors. We bear witness to their suffering as God opens our eyes to their lived reality. At the same time, we too are experiencing, in different ways, loss, grief and anxiety. The virus has touched all our lives. But we know that as theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that "the God of life will defeat the force of death. We know that the Friday execution could not defeat the life lived by Jesus nor the life lived by his faithful people."

*As people of faith, how do bear witness to that life given to us by God and the reality, described by Brueggemann, that the presence of God "persists amid pestilence?"* By doing the work of ministry grounded in the Word and performed by acts. The acts being the corporal and spiritual works of mercy (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, comforting the mourner...). He speaks of this work of ministry, in his recent book, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, as

“neighborliness.” “The act,” he states, “is performed by neighborly gesture in a time of fear, by neighborly generosity and hospitality in a time of self-preoccupation, and by neighborly policies in the face of predatory greed.”

“The work of ministry,” Brueggemann goes on to say, “is to render the virus as penultimate, to see that even its lethal force is outflanked by the goodness of God.” The virus is defeated by the acts that bring about the loving presence of God and thus living “God’s good future of neighborliness.”

Living God’s good future of neighborliness that offers hope to our brothers and sisters in this time of COVID is the work of ministry at the St. Benedict Catholic Worker. During this time of *physical distancing* that is required to mitigate the effects of the virus, we have reconfigured ways our acts can bring the loving presence of God without *socially distancing* ourselves from our neighbors. Reconfiguration is about how we bring about “the good future of neighborliness” to a hurting world. The artist, Virginia Maksymowicz’s work, “Christ of the COVID Breadline” (located at the top of this newsletter) is an artistic reconfiguration of Catholic Worker artist Fritz Eichenberg’s print, “Christ of the Breadlines” (1951). Her work illustrates the responsive, steadfast, and loving presence of God at work through acts in our everyday life.

For Raul and his family, for instance, that means we keep physical distance, by placing the boxes at Raul’s front yard gate. As always when doing food deliveries, we wear masks and encourage those who receive food to wear a mask by including masks in their food boxes. We engage in conversation—mutual sharing of personal news, a joke, or how each of us are doing and coping during this time. Our conversations break the psychological barrier of physical distancing and fosters social closeness. We ask about each person’s needs before we depart and promise to do the best we can to bring them what they need.

Raul’s family is just one of the many families that we share the goodness of God in the form of providing food to those in need. Food deliveries, prepared meals for those unable to cook for themselves, sack meals for those living on the streets, distributing menstrual products (Tampons, pads, and feminine wipes) to fight “Period Poverty,” and psychological needs address through pastoral counseling via phone, Facetime, and Zoom (a work-in-progress for this Boomer).

Walter Brueggemann, in his poem “Let the Dance Begin...Soon,” describes our next moves, our acts, this way...

we will *walk* the long march of obedience;  
we will *run* the race of discipleship;  
we will *soar* like eagles into God’s good future of neighborliness.”

Please *walk with us*, *run with us* and *soar with us* “into God’s good future of neighborliness” by donating what you can to help bring God’s loving presence to our neighbors in need, outflanking this virus by the goodness of God.

--Liza Apper, OblOSB