Death in the Pot: A Bible Story for Today

There is a story in the Old Testament book of 2 Kings Chapter 4, about the prophet Elisha traveling to a place called Gilgal during a famine to meet in class with the sons of the prophet. Elisha asked his servant to prepare a stew to feed the people gathered around him. One of the sons of the prophet unintentionally dropped some poisonous gourds he had gathered into the stewpot, not knowing they were poisonous and when one of the students realized what was happening exclaimed to Elisha that there was “death in the pot!”

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems so many so-called Christian leaders have forgotten this story. Death is not in the pot, but in the pulpit.

Jerry Falwell, Jr., Robert Jeffress, Franklin Graham and others like them are handing out poisoned stew to their followers, under the guise of offering nourishment. By defiantly holding huge services or reopening college campuses in the midst of a public health crisis, they are endangering countless lives by exposing everyone at these gatherings to a potentially deadly virus, at the same time risking the health and lives of their families, their neighbors, and their communities.

These modern-day prophets seem to have skipped over the story of Elisha, who saved the people from tragedy by sprinkling flour in the stew to absorb the poison. Like the scientific knowledge we have today—which, thanks to our God-given intelligence, we can use to both survive and thrive—Elisha used his knowledge to save the prophets from dying of their own ignorance. But when the self-styled Christian leaders should be sprinkling the flour of safety and urging worshipers to stay home, they instead serve up a toxic mess.

Their dismissal of science and medicine demonstrates not a strong faith in the Lord, but a repudiation of the Christian principles they claim to espouse. Their insistence on religion being dependent on a place – the church building – belies the Bible’s declaration that God does not live in temples made by man.

It’s particularly disturbing to see black preachers abandoning common sense and their duty to their flocks in this way. In his groundbreaking 1963 work “The Negro Church in America,” the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier called black churches a “nation within a nation.” By this he meant that black churches are more than centers of faith and worship; they are centers for the social, economic and political survival of the community. Their role is not to sit back and tell the congregation to put their faith in Jesus to solve their earthly problems, but to inspire them to take action to solve them.

That has never been more important than it is right now. The COVID-19 pandemic is striking down blacks in far greater proportion to their numbers in cities from Chicago to New Orleans. The economic impact of the virus also is striking our communities especially hard. These intertwined outcomes underscore the sweeping long-term impact of the structural racism that continues to pervade our nation.
It even takes its toll on black ministers—for instance, Gerald O. Glenn of the New Deliverance Evangelistic Church in Richmond, Virginia. On March 22, despite warnings of the dangers of large gatherings, he held Sunday services for 185 members of his congregation, telling them “I firmly believe that God is larger than this dreaded virus.”

He died from COVID-19 on Easter Sunday.

Proclaiming, as these preachers do, that church attendance is what the Creator demands despite a deadly virus—or that the pandemic is a punishment on the nation for turning away from God, or that they have the power to heal the virus or magically ban it from of their churches—is beyond arrogance. This is precisely what Jesus himself repudiated over and over in the Gospels. He stood resolutely against the mega-church preachers and false prophets of his day, the wealthy and powerful whose words belied their deeds. Did he not tell the rich man that the key to salvation was to sell all he owned and give it to the poor?

Which is why it is an even greater travesty that these preachers lend their staunch support to the current administration – further belying their claims to following Christian principles. This administration’s inaction is the chief reason there are almost 600,000 cases of the disease in America, growing every day! —with nearly 24,000 Americans needlessly in their graves. The president’s unwavering focus on his popularity and his TV ratings, his stoking of xenophobia and racism, his dismissal of science, his refusal to accept responsibility while also claiming powers to which he is not entitled – these are not Christian attributes, they are not life-affirming, but life-denying. Death is in the pulpit.

The false prophets of Christianity and their political allies would have us embrace nationalism and exceptionalism, bolstered by the racism that underlies those ideas. Jesus was a globalist. He taught us to be compassionate, to use wisdom, to be loving and caring. To feed people who are hungry, not tell them it’s their fault for being poor and walk away. His words and deeds are the opposite of what we’re hearing and seeing in some houses of worship today, and in the White House.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes clear the difference between people like these so-called Christians and himself: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” If we are to have that full life, then we must recognize who the thieves are among us, and refuse to eat their poisoned stew.

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