

Second Sunday After Epiphany, 2017

Saint Clare's Church

Michelle Heyne, OA – Presiding Officer, Order of the Ascension

During my drive to church a couple of weeks ago on my way to Evening Prayer, I listened to a radio story about Jonas Salk, who developed an effective “killed virus” vaccine that was used to arrest the polio epidemic in the US and around the world. I'm sure a number of you have personal experience with how terrifying the prospect of polio was. I've heard my mother's stories over the years but I hadn't known much about Dr. Salk or the events surrounding the discovery of the vaccine.

To give some sense of the magnitude of the disease, in 1952 alone, there were nearly 58,000 cases of polio reported, with 3,145 people dying and over 21,000 left with mild to disabling paralysis. It was often described as a “plague.” People who lived in urban areas, especially, were terrified every summer when polio was most virulent.

Jonas Salk was born to an immigrant Jewish family in 1914. His parents had very little formal education. He attended New York public schools known for providing an opportunity to gifted children who didn't have the money or social standing to get into a top private school. He graduated from medical school knowing he wanted to work in research, which was unusual for a medical doctor. He had a clear interest in disease eradication.

After completing his residency, he had a very difficult time finding a place to conduct his research, mostly due to policies that restricted the number of Jews who could be hired. Eventually he was offered a job researching polio at what would later become the March of Dimes.

From the time he took the job in 1947 to the time the polio vaccine was announced in 1955, Salk worked long hours with a single purpose: he had determined that a killed virus vaccine had the best chance of success and he worked at that persistently. He later described this time as, “...years of drudgery and hard work.”

When the discovery of the vaccine was finally announced, Salk became world famous overnight. The country responded almost as if a war had ended -- church bells were ringing across

the country, factories were observing moments of silence, synagogues and churches were holding prayer meetings, and parents and teachers were weeping. And Jonas Salk came to personify the country's gratitude and relief.

At the height of excitement over the vaccine, a reporter asked Salk, "Who owns this patent?" He replied, "No one. Could you patent the sun?" He made it clear he thought the vaccine was a gift to humanity, a contribution to the common good. Although he benefited financially and professionally from his early success, monetary gain and public accolades were never his objective and they never took him away from his focus on eradicating disease to benefit humanity. He personally found the challenges of fame, including the frequent distractions from work and the total loss of a private life very difficult to handle. But despite these challenges, he channeled his success into continuing to do the work.

At different times over the years, he had disagreements with another researcher, who eventually developed a "safe and effective" oral live virus vaccine. The other researcher frequently attacked Salk and the killed virus vaccine, despite the fact the killed virus vaccine worked and despite the fact that it was made available several years before the live virus vaccine.

Salk, on the other hand, remained consistently focused on the evidence. He encouraged the use of the live *and* the killed virus vaccines based on the environmental circumstances and what was likely to help the most people. He was able to get the perspective needed to shift mostly from his own ego and his own bias and was therefore able to bring truth to bear to a serious problem.

He was also able to obtain money to found The Salk Institute, where he and other scientists continued to work after the discovery of the polio vaccine. The Institute never had the same sort of massive, single success experienced with polio, which some may have found disheartening. But as Dr. Salk said in an interview on the 25th anniversary of the vaccine, "In the end, what may have more significance [than the vaccine itself] is my creation of the Institute and what will come out of it, because of its example as a place for excellence, a creative environment for creative minds." In saying this he seems to offer an understanding of the power of human beings pursuing the work they've been given to do in an environment that nurtures their vocation.

I kept thinking about Salk as I read today's readings. For the past couple of weeks the readings have focused on the power of prophetic witness, and on doing the work in front of us, despite darkness, despite resistance, and despite changes in where God is calling us to go. Today's Gospel continues with the ministry of John the Baptist. As prior passages have done in different ways, today's reading again shows John pointing to Christ and away from himself. We hear John encouraging Andrew and another of his own disciples to look and see that Jesus is the Lamb of God. The actual consequence of this is that these disciples of John's immediately take off after Jesus. After spending time with Jesus, Andrew returns to his brother Simon-Peter and tells him they have found the Messiah. In this way we learn about Jesus' first two disciples, but we learn about them through the pathway provided by John the Baptist.

John is the last Jewish prophet before Jesus. He was a wildly-dressed, fiery and insistent preacher who saw an urgent need for repentance through baptism. He was the kind of person I would probably spot from a block away and quickly cross the street to avoid.

He used the Jewish practice of full immersion for purification as a means of getting the people to turn away from sin and back to the way of life found in the covenant between God and Israel. He seems to have had a large following and many people of the time thought he was himself the Messiah.

What the Gospel narrative shows, however, is that when John encountered Jesus at the beginning of Jesus' own ministry, he changed the focus. John was the go-to person for the baptism of repentance and had been very successful in that. But instead of continuing to exhort the faithful to come to him for baptism, he now pointed to Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Instead of immersion as individual repentance, of the cleansing of heart and body, an ongoing and repeated need, John now pointed to Jesus as the one who, in himself, saves us from sin.

John's example for us shows an incredible individuality and strength of purpose in calling the people to repentance. He was not a tame, conventional person, sweetly encouraging the Jews to do the best they could, but only if they felt comfortable. He was wild, unruly, and socially unacceptable. He saw the urgency of the times, and he did not hesitate to tell the truth or say hard things.

John was going about his business, doing the work of God, successfully baptizing and successfully bringing about a conversion of heart. And then he encountered Jesus and realized that work needed to change and to change quickly. It's not that John's part of the story before

Jesus wasn't important. It's that the meaning of the narrative was shown to be profoundly altered. John's role was no longer to prepare the hearts of the people for the coming Messiah through the baptism of repentance. His role was now to acknowledge the Messiah dwelling among us and to direct the people to follow Him.

In addition to his fierce individuality, John's example shows us a remarkable humility grounded in his love of God and his love of the truth. John had the wisdom and strength to recognize that the story had changed and to see where his work now was. Upon meeting the Lamb of God, upon seeing the Light of the Nations, he took all the power of his unconventional persona, his wild and unruly presence, to continue to tell the truth and to himself be a source of light and illumination.

The truth John proclaimed changed from, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near," to, "This is the Son of God." Those two truths are still with us and they each demand different responses. Today's collect underscores the second one – "This is the Son of God"—and reminds us of our own baptismal identity and purpose.

"Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth..."

Our baptism in Christ does of course symbolize repentance, cleansing, and new commitment to the ways of God. But Christian baptism is not fundamentally about repentance. It is about relationship and our participation with the Trinity in the new creation. It is the sealing of that relationship, our baptism into Christ's death and into His resurrection, that transforms us and makes us new.

And it is that newness and that light that each of us carries into the world precisely because we have become part of Christ's body. We remain who we are, in all our human variety and with all of our real human limitations and, more often than we would like, with all of our real human sin. But we know that we have been clothed in new life and given a power not our own.

The collect talks about our being illumined by God's Word and Sacraments. That is a recognition that we need to come together in this place week by week to be reminded of whose light we carry. It is easy to be caught up in our own sense of duty, of righteousness, of purpose, and to believe that we can do it on our own. But as one of our Eucharistic prayers puts it, we come to the Table not just for solace, but for strength, and not just for pardon but for renewal.

And it is that strength and renewal that allows us to go into the world and shine with the radiance of Christ's glory. It is what helps us see Christ in all persons, and to be the light of Christ in the places and with the people we encounter every day. John the Baptist reminds me that carrying the light is not always nice or comfortable but it is always about truth, as that truth is expressed in Christ. Not the "truth" I make up, or the "truth" that conforms to my politics or the "truth" that helps me feel good about myself. The measure is Christ.

And it is always about carrying the light in the vessels we've actually been given – ourselves, in all our imperfect and awkward glory. Almost none of us will be able to provide the kind of dramatic help to the world that Jonas Salk did. But all of us are able to identify our own vocations in the world, with our families, with our friends, in our workplaces, in our volunteering, in civic life, and in the church. In the routine opportunities we have to be instruments of God's love and compassion with the people and in the places we encounter every day.

We're also able to take stock of our own tendencies to hold too tightly to the "truth" as we define it based solely on our own prejudices and preferences and our fear of being wrong. We all have biases, and in many cases they're actually what makes forward movement possible. If Jonas Salk hadn't relentlessly pursued his bias for a killed virus vaccine, we would likely have suffered with polio for several more years than we did. But he was shaped by the scientific method. He was able to recognize that his bias wasn't the whole story and he encouraged the use of his competitor's live vaccine where that made sense.

He was also able to manage his own bias against fame and material success to allow him to make use of the benefits of that success. He didn't hide from the world but he didn't allow himself to be taken over by it, either.

John the Baptist could have resisted Jesus in favor of building up his own religious movement. Instead, he took a more disciplined, less self-centered approach. John's discipline didn't come out of nowhere – he was shaped by Scripture and by Jewish tradition and worship. He knew how to pay attention to the signs and how to respond to what his faith and his conscience demanded.

As members of the Body of Christ, we too are shaped by Scripture and communal worship. Week by week, day by day, we are illumined by the Word and Sacraments and in being so illumined, we shine with the radiance of God's glory, and each one of us carries the light of Christ into the world.