

May 6, 2020

A blessed Wednesday to my faith family,

I will admit that I am getting “antsy”. How about you? It’s a bit like the feeling that used to come over me as a kid in that last week of school before summer vacation as the weather warmed, the trees leafed out, the birds sang and all of creation seemed to beckon me outside ... and I was stuck in that infernal classroom!

We are 8 weeks into this strangely altered reality where the deeply visceral desire for freedom and full life meets the reality of pandemic, fear and governmental limitation. It is making me “antsy”.

Every day is the same. Lori and I roll out of bed and go to work relating to our people virtually from our own little corners in the same old house. We phone, we zoom, we e-mail, we text - and we never go anywhere to do it. Every week or so, Lori and I get to look at our kids as they drive to the parsonage, put on their masks and roll down the car windows so we can chat from the prescribed 6 foot distance. Their dog, Teddy, sits depressed in the back seat, denied the opportunity to explode out of the car to “wrestle” with me like he has ever since he was a pup. It’s a gift of near normalcy to see them and talk with them, but we don’t get to hug any of them. We crave the return of real relationship with our family.

We crave that normalcy with our faith family too. I was thinking the other day that, other than occasional absence due to illness or family emergency, I’ve gathered together with my brothers and sisters in Christ every Sunday since I was born more than 62 years ago. Not being able to do so also makes me antsy.

For 8 weeks, I have been forced to speak not to living beings, but to Lauren’s I-phone by which I connect to you all “virtually” for Sunday worship. This will be the 8th Sunday that my voice will echo back at me, emphasizing the point sonically that has already been made visually – the church is empty and we’re not together. This will be the 8th Sunday in a row that I don’t see pleasure, comfort, assurance or boredom in your eyes. It’ll be the 8th Sunday in a row that I don’t pull you close for a hug at the sharing of the peace and I don’t shake your hands at the end of the service and feel even that small tactile confirmation of our relationship in Christ.

For 8 weeks, I will not have visited any of you in your homes or in the hospital or called on any of you in your senior living facility. I have not met with you in person to talk about worship or stewardship or faith in action or the work of the church council, deaconesses or Stephen ministers. I’ve heard your voices and I’ve seen some of you in two dimensions on my computer, but that’s it.

I have been forced to reschedule baptismal celebrations, because we cannot gather so that word, water and Spirit may converge in the blessed covenant. I have been forced to reschedule funerals because we cannot gather safely to celebrate the life of the deceased and the love of God, lest we invite the agent of death (COVID-19) to enter into more lives... at a funeral.

I am grateful for the technologies that allow us to maintain connection, if not in person, then at least visually and verbally. I am pleased that we can gather (after a fashion) for meetings, worship, and shared counsel. But I miss you all greatly and I long for a return to normalcy. I am officially antsy. I presume you are too.

So, what shall we do about it? As followers of Jesus, we’re counseled over and over that we shouldn’t live in fear. Scripture advises us that perfect love casts out fear. We know that to bow to

fear, even in the midst of pandemic, is problematic. It narrows life and pinches off our ability to perceive and receive the gifts of God.

Some Christian groups have taken that counsel regarding fear and made of it a test. You saw, as did I, how a number of congregations, some in defiance of governmental stay at home orders, gathered their congregants together on Easter Sunday and some weeks thereafter. They asserted that their gathering was evidence of their faith in the risen one, and that if God **were** indeed good and gracious, God would protect them from the evil virus. Some said that even if they were to contract the virus because they had gathered, that was fine. Christians, they said, should not fear death, if they trust Jesus. Not to gather for worship, they said, would be to give in to fear and provide evidence that they had failed the test of faith. As I heard those words, I couldn't help hearing Jesus' words to the devil as he was being tempted in the desert, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test!"

Let me say that I agree that Christians ought not be ruled by fear, and that we are assured of our union with Christ that persists even beyond our physical deaths. To be solid and unassailable in one's faith is a wonderful thing indeed. But let me also say that the current situation is not just a test of one's faith; it's a test of one's concern and love for others. If we gather and we spread the virus to others and there is illness and loss as a result, we've brought unnecessary grief and suffering. That's hardly the most grace-filled thing. When Jesus affirmed the ultimate importance of the command to love God above all else, he said there's a second commandment linked to that one - we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We ARE in fact, our brother's (and sister's) keepers. Our refusal to gather for worship in these strange times, then, is a way to fulfill the law of love and to care for others.

Let me also affirm that God is honored when we love God more than we fear death. Surely the graves of all of the martyrs who died for their faith are sanctified. That said, there is no Biblical support for risking one's life in defiance of reason and in opposition to the advice of public health experts. Jesus did not say the one who loses their life unnecessarily shall find it. He said, "The one who loses it **for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel**, shall find it". There is a distinction between faith and foolishness. Yes, we are called to take risks for our faith. We should be willing to risk rejection for speaking God's truth, and angry response for guiding folks toward life and rejection because we have offered forgiveness to those who don't deserve it. And if you should happen to risk your physical life for the love of God and/or God's children, that is most blessed. But this life, just like the next, is a precious gift of God intended to be cherished, not wasted. As we move deeper into this pandemic time, the situation will continue to evolve. The ELCA and our own Metro Chicago Synod are busily working on plans to help congregations transition back toward normalcy. We will continue to monitor the situation and to seek the best counsel available to us as we formulate plans for Trinity's eventual transition back to normalcy.

I am antsy. I want to return to normal. I want to come together with you in the same place and look you in the eyes and place the bread of the sacrament in your hands and embrace in joy... and we will do so when the time is right. In the meantime, we push forward as we can, neither succumbing to fear nor giving in to impatience, but trusting in God who will guide us through this time of unusual challenge and accompany us to the recovery of life.... Full and abundant.

Pastor Brown