

My patience is wearing thin. 3 months ago, I began writing these Wednesday letters to you as a way to provide church news updates and pastoral encouragement in the midst of this new pandemic and the massive disruptions of life it had visited upon us.

In mid-March, as news of the virulence of the infection spread, we did what we thought was most prudent, quickly moving to suspend in-person activities here at Trinity. We did so even before the official “stay at home” order came from the governor’s office. Our duty, we reasoned, was to care for our congregation and for the communities in which we live. We most certainly did not want Trinity to become a vector for community transmission. As Christ cared for the most vulnerable among us, so we would care for them. We accepted the odd sounding proposition that faithfulness to the Lord of Love in these strange times would mean **not** gathering for worship at church.

I worried at the beginning of all of this that it could go on for several weeks – maybe even a month! Of course it was not over in one month, or two, or three. It has been three, and the end is not yet in sight. It has been a full quarter of a year since we have been able to gather together, sing praises, confess our faith with one voice, greet each other, hug each other or shake one another’s hands. We’ve gone a quarter of the year without having the opportunity to sit around tables in the Gathering Space sharing stories, laughter and tears. The scourge goes on and I, along with many others, am growing impatient. I am chomping at the bit. It is agonizing not to be together with my faith family in person.

Sadly, the things that we most celebrate about gathering together as a church are the very things that make churches among the most effective points of transmission for the disease. Close proximity with others over a protracted span of time in enclosed Spaces is really problematic. Singing, and speaking together as we do in the liturgy and prayers fills the air with aerosolized viral particles. Gathering to talk before or after worship offers great opportunity for the contagion to spread. How frustrating to think that some of the chief blessings of being together in the body of Christ are major risk factors!

Taking all of the foregoing into consideration, and in keeping with guidelines issued by our Synod and the Illinois department of Public Health, council agreed at our June meeting last week, that **we will continue with our suspension of in person worship and other meetings here at the church through the Summer months**. We do so as an expression of care and concern for our members, and for the communities in which they reside. We do so as, this week, we learned that states that had opened up their economies and loosened public health strictures have experienced large increases in infections and hospitalizations. There is no treatment. There is no vaccine. Very little has changed except that folks have grown weary of living with these safety restrictions.

We will continue to be the church – worshipping, praying, serving, and loving - but we'll do so remotely.

Now there are some churches that are clamoring to open up and to do worship in person. Many of them have characterized the limitations on religious gatherings as examples of egregious governmental overreach. Some brought lawsuits and/or opened their doors in defiance of guidelines and regulations. They argued vociferously that this is, first and foremost, an issue of constitutional law – an illegal abridging of their first amendment rights. The government, they say, is prohibited from making laws that limit the free exercise of religion. “The Law Of God trumps any human law”, they say. I do agree with that last part. God law holds sway over any human law; but the question is, which law? I suggest that it is the law of love.

If one tracks the ministry of Jesus through the Gospels, one finds that when the choice was before him to honor the Sabbath law as tradition mandated or to love and care for others, he chose the latter. Time and again, Jesus found himself at odds with the spiritual leaders of the people because, in “violation” of the Sabbath law, Jesus did the “work” of healing sick folks, relieving their suffering, and giving them back their lives. In other words, for Jesus, the law of love was preeminent, holding sway over every other. More than that, the way to properly honor the Sabbath (and just as a reminder, Jesus did make clear that “humankind was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for humankind” – Mark 2:27) is to love.

This question of whether we open our doors and gather folks for in-person worship, then, is not an issue to be addressed by Christians chiefly as a matter constitutional law, individual rights, or the legalistic “honoring” of Sabbath law that compels attendance. It is question that is to be addressed, like every other question that we disciples of Christ Jesus face; it is to be viewed through the lens of the law of love. Whatever we think our individual rights are, the reality is that we all live in community, and as Jesus was at pains to point out, we have a responsibility to care for our neighbors. (Luke 10:27-37)

I am impatient. I sense that many of you are too. Our whole country is impatient to return to “normal”. The entire world is impatient. It's been 3 months, for God's sake! It feels like *forever!*

But you know that from a Biblical perspective, the fact that we have made it 3 months living in this weirdly inconvenient new reality where we can't gather together... well, we are pikers when it comes to patience and endurance.

I think of Abraham and Sarah who were promised by God that they'd have a child, an heir, the founding of a whole nation. They waited not months, but decades! They waited on God until they were wrinkled, dry and old! They waited so long that when the angel came to announce to Sarah that she'd give birth the next year, She laughed

because the thought of it was so ludicrous! (When the baby was born the very next year, they named him Isaac, which means “laughter”.)

Patience. I think of Jacob serving Laban. 7 years before Laban would consent and give his daughter Rachel’s hand in marriage. At the end of that 7th year Laban doubled down on commitment and required another 7 years of service from Jacob, before granting what he had promised. He waited 14 years. That’s patience!

I think of the Prophet Ezekiel, who, in order to make a visual point about 390 years of punishment for Israel, lay on his side for 390 days. Then he laid on his other for 40 days. (Ezekiel 4:4-6)

I think of the Jews waiting for God’s deliverance from exile in Babylon for a full 40 years. I think of the whole nation calling out to God from their bondage in Egypt. They were there 400 years before God rescued them “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 5:15)

More than all of the waiting and all of the patience and incredible perseverance evidenced in those Biblical stories, I think of the way that God’s promises were fulfilled. After all that patient waiting, Isaac **was** born to Abraham and Sarah. After all that patient waiting, Jacob **did** marry Rachel. After a full generation God **did** bring God’s people home from exile in Babylon. After 400 years, God **did** hear the people crying out in captivity in Egypt and brought them forth “*with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm*”. In all of those situations of patient waiting, God created and recreated his people, drawing them together and bringing them life.

So, yes, I am anxious and impatient to come together, to have a normal life, normal church, worship and physical community.... But if Jacob could wait 14 years, and Abraham could wait on God for a full lifetime, and the exiles could wait in Babylon for an entire generation to return home, and the Israelites could wait in bondage in Egypt 400 years. Well then, perhaps we can trust in God to get us past a few months on lockdown! More than that, I believe that we can trust God to bring us through all of this renewed in hope, refreshed in holy joy, and filled with life – new, abundant, and eternal!

Patience!

Pastor Brown