

Sunday, September 13, 2020 Psalm 122, Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18: 15-20

Come and Worship

It is great to be back in the sanctuary and seeing faces of people both familiar and new! It is different from when we last met here on March 15—everyone is in masks, hand sanitizer bottles are located around the building and there seems to be a sense of loss—what was normal is now modified and changed to something different and whether what we did before will return is yet to be determined.

Yet here we are- wanting and needing to be together to pray. And yes we would like to sing together God's praises but hearing the familiar melodies and saying the words in our hearts does help us to realize that we are moving into something different than what we considered normal. On March 15 I shared this slide which was somewhat new to many at that time. Yet 6 months later most of us would identify it as the covid19 virus. In these weeks and months since then we have heard how this virus has spread and how people became very sick and many died. We have also learned a great deal about this virus, and about what is important in our lives.

The numbers of cases are continuing to rise in certain countries. In other areas the cases have been back tracked and now with tracing mechanisms put in place information about where and possibly from whom the virus was shared is becoming known even from asymptomatic carriers. Just think about how much you have learned through the work of 'frontline workers' needing PPE and the difference between face masks and face shields. We have learned new medical phrases and the need for social distancing is a common phrase posted everywhere including here in our church.

We are heading towards mid-September and children and youth have begun classes- at home, at school, online or a combination of these. Ultimate caution and care is being taken in schools with more staff hired to hopefully keep everyone safe and healthy. But what has been missing in all the information being shared is what we need to consider today. How are we connected to each other yet separated by social distancing? God- Father, Son and Spirit.

Our Psalm 122 reading states, I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of God" Why would the Psalmist write this? Because going into the house of God brought to the forefront of their lives the hope they have in God. This is what we have been missing- we have had the need to be able to sit in this place and experience God's Spirit moving upon us. There is

healing in this yearning for God. There is joy as well—knowing that we are not alone in this world. The Psalmist also writes that there is a need to pray for peace for Jerusalem. Well, we can expand this—there is a need for peace for our world. A peace that enables everyone to share information regarding the pandemic virus, and what a vaccine might mean for the people of the world, not just one country. We need to pray for peace not just for our families but all people. We are people of God and because we believe we need to look at the words of Paul to the Romans.

Paul writes: ‘we do not live to ourselves- if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die we die to the Lord so whether we are living or dying- we are the Lord’s. Christ died and lived again so that he might be lord of both the dead and the living.’ This passage is often shared at funeral or memorial services for loved ones. The reason for this is because there is hope in these words for the family members who are seeking it because in some situations family members are seeking answers as to what will happen with their loved one. Whether we live or die we belong to God. Jesus died and rose again for the sake of others but God made us all. So whether we live or die we still belong to God. The difference is for those who believe is that the personal relationship we can have with God, His Son and Spirit enables each person and others what that relationship is.

God made us all. God loves us whether we are living or dead; Jesus died and rose again for everyone. But the hope we have is in the relationship we might or can have while we are alive, while we are seeking to grow in faith and knowledge of God Jesus and the Spirit. It is this closer relationship that we can say for sure is based on faith and continues to grow through one’s life. Paul continues to say that each person is accountable for themselves. For there will come a time when ‘every knee shall bow; every tongue shall give praise to God,’ and tell their story in faith.

And it is in those moments when one’s life is recalled. Moments of doubt, of fear of questioning God and even losing faith. There are many people who are currently living in fear. The opposite of fear is courage and having faith and trust beyond oneself. Of what are they afraid? Certainly ‘getting’ sick from the covid19 virus and dying, but there are other things we have learned in these last six months about people. People need other people. People who have been in lockdown alone need other people to talk, interact and even hug. But there is also the fear of the unknown because what occurred in the past is returning in the same way.

Let me ask this- how many of you were tested for covid19? How many know of someone else who was tested for covid19? How many of those whom you know that were tested had positive results? Were these results warranting to be declared an official 'case'? If having tested positive were you or the person you know having active response to the virus—needing medical care- or were you told to be self-isolating Ok so of the numbers of people here whom we know that were tested resulting in a positive active case—how many of these people are now ok? Yes the numbers may say one thing- but what are we afraid of?

The gospel reading from Matthew 18 might seem odd to be sharing on a day when we welcome everyone back to the church, but when we take the situation of conflict within the church and use covid19 as the base for the conflict what are we really saying? Find out the truth- about your friends and church family members and go from there.. Be courageous and ask the questions about each person's social bubble and safety protocols. And learn what is known- that we need not be afraid if we can get covid19 from our church family unless symptoms have shown. And asking these questions, enables us to draw closer to each other not physically right now, but to truly care about others. As a church we care about each other- when we are hurting, celebrating or somewhere in between. This is what we are called to do. But as humans we will be in conflict because God has given us the ability to think and feel and have different ideas and thoughts about various issues. Yet when it comes to Jesus we do agree that He is the Son of God, who taught us how to love and through this we may be reconciled, forgiven and show how much we care for each other. But we must talk and share our experiences with others. We need to turn to each other and show that we care. Why? As you've heard this many times we are all in this together.. We are not going to be getting off this planet anytime soon. So let's get along—let's grow together in faith because whenever 2 or 3 get together in my name- Jesus is present! This is worth celebrating!

Most of the time when angels appeared to people in any of our biblical accounts about them, their first words were 'fear not'. Often they shared great news—the birth of the Christ child; that Jesus was alive, and that there was no reason to be afraid. But Jesus also spoke these words and said, "Fear not. I am always with you." Be brave, courageous and faithful. All will be well in time. For as former US President Teddy Roosevelt stated, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear."

Listening to colleagues in ministry in the US there is so much frustration around the political agenda of right/left mask/no mask/ freedoms and rights that it is difficult for many Christian leaders to say something and not be misinterpreted. And what they are encountering

the most by many people is fear. We too have this sense of fear- if we get the covid19 virus we will die. This is not the case anymore- we might get sick but many people who have had this disease and died have taught the medical leaders so much. And from this shared wisdom there comes a time for hope. The vaccine race is on but we also must remember that the rust also be due diligence and testing that is done properly to combat this disease.

We are to be courageous, and have faith that all will work out. In the meantime there is much to do as we share Jesus' message of never leaving us. There is much to do in being the church in person online or even on the street receiving gifts and blessings for those in need. There is much to do and we have been called to do it in faith, in hope and as we pray for peace.

Let us remember this as we share together in this time of prayer.

God of grace and love we praise you and thank you that we are here in this building we call our church home. We know that these last 6 months have been difficult for many people and that this pandemic still poses many problems, threats and losses to others. But we know that we are not alone- whether we live or die we belong to you. We also believe and have faith in you because Jesus died and rose again for each of us. This is the message we have heard, received and want to tell to others in new and exciting ways. Continue to bless your church- as we gather as church family, as we share with those unknown to us online and as we continue to reach out to those who seek you. Bless us we pray as we seek your love and to know you in faith and with hope. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.