

A Note from Pastor Jeff on COVID-19

The other day I was asked, “Why are we not open? Other churches are open and I don’t know anybody who has COVID-19.” That is a good question and one that I struggle with daily. Then I look around the country and see massive outbreaks of the virus and realize that could be us very easily. Maybe the reason we do not see many cases where we live is that so many people are not gathering in large groups and that many people are isolating, wearing masks in public and distancing themselves from others. It is because we are being cautious that very little is happening. It is a case of were doing nothing is a good thing.

Yes, we could be gathering at church and maybe nothing would happen as it seems in churches around us. Here is the dilemma, what happens when one person, who seems healthy, is carrying the virus and joins us. That person could be any one of us who has been in contact with others at the grocery store, work, gas stations, or even neighbors. This virus is unseen and easily spread. If only one person in our congregation becomes seriously ill would it have been worth the risk of gathering on Sunday morning?

The following is snippet of a paper written by Retired Professor Gordon Lathrop of Wartburg Seminary:

Thinking Again about Assembly In a Time of Pandemic

Martin Luther, in the midst of the Black Death afflicting Germany in 1527, writing to a plague-weary people, rightly complained of those who avoided careful sanitary practice, people whom Luther said wished to “prove how independent they are.” He went on:

If they make no use of intelligence or medicine when they could do so without detriment to their neighbors, such people injure their bodies and must beware lest they become a suicide in God’s eyes. . . . It is even more shameful for them to pay no heed to their own bodies and fail to protect them against the plague the best they are able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if they had taken care of their bodies as they should have. . . . No, my dear friends, that is not good. Use medicine; . . . fumigate the house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence, . . . and act like someone who wants to help put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body?*

Luther wrote this in a time when people had little idea of how disease spread, thinking the plague resulted from “bad air.” But his call for using intelligence and medicine and for caring for the neighbor and the city is still amazingly apt. We also now need to avoid any place except a place where our neighbor may need us: as in health workers needing to be in hospitals or grocers needing to be in grocery stores or volunteers needing to be at food banks. If that means avoiding also the assembling of the church, then it must be so. Luther’s advice is exactly right. To the extent that we can, the burning city still needs us to stay home. That is how we may protect our neighbor and how we may begin to put out the fire.

** “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” in *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 4: Pastoral Writings (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 403-4.

Please be patient and cautious. Pastor Jeff