

Wednesday, March 4, 2020

Dear Siblings in Christ:

Take a deep breath. Let it out slowly. Take another deep breath. Let it out slowly. When you're ready, try saying these words from Psalm 56 a few times:

"When I am afraid, I put my trust in You."

If it helps, say it as many times as you need in order to get your heart rate down a bit.

These have not been easy days in our corner of the country and in many other parts of the world. We've all been learning a lot about pandemics, epidemics, and disease outbreaks in the last few weeks and much of what we've learned has been anxiety-producing. COVID-19 is a new disease to humans and there's a lot of uncertainty about it. Some of what we're hearing is pretty frightening and, I don't know about you, but I admit I'm eyeing every cough, snuffle, and sneeze with more than a little suspicion. I'm thinking about my health and the health of all those I love and care about all the time.

That includes all of you. I've had at least one meeting every day for the last week and a half about this particular topic in an effort to think about all the different ways we might cope with this outbreak. Each day comes with a new realization, a new risk, or a new solution. We're all learning as we go and I'm going to continue to try and share with you what I learn along the way.

There are several good sources of information about preventing the transmission of COVID-19. I've found the information at the Washington State Department of Health to be particularly helpful and clear. This site is being updated several times a day. The UCC also has a page on our website that includes a great bulletin insert and links to other helpful resources.

Many of you have already started to rethink the ways worship can continue without being a place that endangers the health of others. Figuring out alternative ways to greet one another and pass the peace in a way that doesn't pass on infectious disease is a conversation every congregation needs to have. Bowing, elbow bumps, a peace sign, or a simple wave and smile have been practices some congregations have adopted. Figuring out ways that no unsanitized hands are involved in sharing and receiving communion has been something many of you have been working through for a while, now. Thinking about similar things with the offering plates is important. The bulletin insert from the UCC has some helpful suggestions to begin your thinking.

The request to stay home from church services if you're sick is not a new request. However, the guidance to stay at home if you're at high risk of contracting a serious case of COVID-19 has been harder for churches to suggest and members to heed. Yesterday, I was part of a meeting that Faith Action Network pulled together with interfaith leaders and Governor Inslee. He talked about this quite a bit. So far, all the deaths in Washington State been of people who were over 60 and/or had an underlying issue related to a compromised immune system, heart disease, diabetes, or respiratory illness. Governor Inslee has suggested to his own mother that she not go to church for a while.

Not only that, but **the World Health Organization has started to see a pattern that suggests that folks 60 and over and those with underlying health conditions are more likely to be carriers for COVID-19.** Otherwise, even if someone from a high-risk group attends church and doesn't get sick, there is a pattern emerging that suggests that they might inadvertently increase the risk to others.

I mention both these things completely aware that many of our churches have memberships that are predominantly made up of people over 60. It's clear that we not only need to seek out new ways to be in worship together, but we also need to expand access to worship through

electronic means. For a while, we need to have an understanding of pastoral care that receives the loving intent of a phone call on the same level as we might a personal visit. It will be the combination of a loving absence by many combined with the loving recognition of that absence by many others that will help us get through this moment. As I said in an earlier email, we're at a point when we need to figure out how to be present *for* each other even if we can't be present *with* each other.

The next few months are not going to be easy. They're just not. I'm also confident that God is with us and in the coming days we are going to expand our creativity, love, covenant, and faith in more ways than we could have imagined.

So, take a deep breath. Let it out slowly. Take another deep breath. Let it out slowly. When you're ready, try saying these words from Psalm 56 a few more times:

"When I am afraid, I put my trust in You."

I am convinced that, sometime in the not too distant future, we are going to look back with awe at all the new ways we learned to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. May it be so.

With hope,

Mike

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