

The Main Thing
Matthew 28:16-20, John 20:19-22
First Presbyterian Church
August 30, 2020

Matthew 28:16-20,

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. 18And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

John 20:19-22

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.

Sermon

Who would have imagined? Who would have imagined that after more than six months Heather and I would still be staring into a camera and you would be staring back at us through your screen? Who would have imagined Holy Week and Easter and Pentecost celebrated virtually... or using real wine for communion or worshipping in our pajamas (which I know some of you really like!)? Who could have imagined an FPC spring without Preschool graduation and Quest confirmation... a summer without Vacation Bible School and youth mission trips and Massanetta and Montreat? Who could have imagined folks who once saw each other at least once a week feeling like they're greeting long lost friends when we bump into each other in the grocery store (assuming we can recognize each other under our masks.) Truly, who would have imagined. Yet, these changes... wrought by a virus that seemed to take control of our lives

almost overnight... these changes have now settled in (kind of like an unpleasant relative that long overstays his welcome).

Back in April a pastor colleague sent me an article that was written in March when all of this seemed new... yet amazingly has proved to be very preshunt (cient). The article is titled "Leading Beyond the Blizzard" and its message was that the novel coronavirus was not something to "get through" for a few days like you would a blizzard. Instead, the authors said, we need to think of it as we do a long winter that may extend into a "little ice age" — a once-in-a-lifetime change that could affect our lives and organizations for years.¹

¹ "Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization Is Now a Startup" by Andy Crouch, Kurt Keilhacker, and Dave Blanchard. See <https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>

Back in March, most of us were thinking of COVID-19 like we do a blizzard – we would hunker down and wait it out... and when it was over, we will all emerge from our shelter and get on with life. The truth is that none of our public health officials and infectious disease specialists believed this. Back in March, Drs. Fauci and Birx (now household names), stated that Americans should expect measures to combat the spread of the virus to last through “July or August” - which is precisely where we find ourselves today... living through the winter of this pandemic.

Now, I want to press the “pause” button and share with you what our staff and session are planning for our life together during this season of winter. And since everything we do as church EXCEPT in-person gathering has continued and even expanded, what I am going to share is mostly about a slow and gradual process of re-gathering for “in-person” activities. I emphasize “slow and gradual” because this is not like flipping a switch and all of a sudden, the light is on. No, it’s more like operating a dimmer switch which allows your eyes to adjust to the growing light. This slow and gradual process will allow us to continually assess the situation and adjust our plans as needed. So, let me share our plans for worship... but before I do, allow me take one more opportunity to express our collective thanks to Carol Anne Hartman and Matt Schrum for their amazing work in bringing our worship services to you each week. (Heather operating camera - picture) We know how much you appreciate them because you have told us how much you appreciate them. So, thank you, Carol Anne and Matt! And we’re not letting them go anywhere because our plan is to continue to pre-record our service through the month of September. So, “worship-wise” nothing will change for the next five Sundays.

However, on October 4 – the first Sunday in October – TWO things WILL change. First, we will shift from pre-recording to livestreaming. Livestreaming will be the way we will offer our service online AFTER we regather in person... AND (though it won’t allow any “re-takes” when Heather or I mess up) we believe that livestreaming will offer us a “more normal” online worship experience. So, we will begin livestreaming in October... and the OTHER CHANGE is that October 4 will be the first Sunday we will invite some of you to join us here in this space for worship. This, of course, assumes our session believes it is safe to do so. We are in the process of determining how many of us can safely gather in the sanctuary and in the fellowship hall... and we plan to have you sign up on our website so, we don’t exceed that number. We will expect everyone to wear a face-covering... and we will designate separate entrance and exit doors. And finally, we will trust you to stay home and worship online if you are not feeling well that particular day... which, as we enter flu season, should always be our practice. The congregational survey we took a few weeks ago revealed numbers I think are probably still accurate – roughly 25% of those who responded were comfortable with in-person worship... about 30% said you will not feel comfortable until an effective vaccine and treatment are widely available... and the rest of you are understandably uncertain – you’re waiting to see how things go before making your decision. What we want you to hear very clearly is that under no circumstances should any of you feel pressure to return to in-person worship. Especially those of you (or I should say those of US) who are in high-risk categories... we should not feel any pressure to return.

We will continue online worship along with other opportunities to connect, so all of us can continue to be safe AND feel a part of this community. So, in October we will livestream one service – alternating between sanctuary and Kairos – then, on November 1st, we will begin livestreaming BOTH services each Sunday morning. Kairos will start at 9:00 and the Sanctuary worship at 10:00. Each music team will lead their respective service and the same pastor will preach both services. And, of course, social distancing, masks, and all other precautions will be in place for those of you who attend in person.

The final thing related to worship... and I am really excited about this - every other WEDNESDAY EVENING beginning September 16, we are planning to have a short 30-minute Vespers service outdoors in front of the church under the trees. This is a “bring your own chair” kind of thing with Bible readings, short message, prayers, and songs offered by a soloist or small group. This is weather permitting, of course, and again, we will keep our social distance and wear masks. So, outdoor worship on Wednesday evenings at 6 pm, beginning September 16 and going as long as the weather cooperates.

Now, finally we have arrived at the question I know you have all been asking – when can I quit cooking on Wednesday nights? When, pray tell, will Matt Parker again become an essential part of my weekly supper planning? Well, here’s the deal – obviously we can’t all gather inside the fellowship hall like before ...but that doesn’t mean we can’t do take out, does it? Matt Parker and his crew are downright excited to start spoiling us again with take-out each Wednesday evening between 5:30 and 6:00. Of course, you will sign up ahead of time and then drive-through to pick up your meals. OR... if you would like to bring chairs and utensils, you might want to have a picnic somewhere outdoors on our church grounds. In addition, our Congregational Care Committee and Stephen Ministers will be delivering meals to some of our members who are not comfortable getting out. So, my friends, I am pleased to inform you that beginning September 16 Wednesday Night Supper is back! Cue the applause track, Matt! These are our plans for now - subject to good-ole Presbyterian common sense about the virus – for this period of winter.

However, this is a “novel” virus... there is still much we do not know about it... and this leads at least some folks to predict the impact of COVID is not only for a WINTER SEASON – (which has a beginning and an end) but will extend into what might be called a little ice age. In the year 1816 the eruption of Mount Tamora produced a worldwide ash plume that reduced solar radiation and led to widespread crop failures and bitter cold temperatures. Back in the 14th century, a so-called “Little Ice Age” lasted for some three-hundred years and shaped European history in profound ways. Well, without stretching the metaphor too far... just as winter is more chronic and long-lasting than a blizzard, there are even larger-scale events like COVID that reshape our lives through many seasons.

As you know, heroic efforts are being made to find both treatments and vaccines to battle the virus, but this process takes time. And while no one expects the effects of COVID-19 to last centuries, many experts expect its impact to be felt many years from now – its impact on business and the economy ... the impact on our educational and healthcare systems... the impact on global poverty and migration patterns... AND the impact on the church... which is what I want to briefly talk about now.

I suppose the way I see things now in our community of faith is that in the past six months we have come through the first and hopefully ONLY blizzard... that we are now planning for what our church's ministry and mission will look like during a longer winter season... AND, that very soon we will need to start planning for changes that we anticipate will be even longer lasting... for the ways things will never be the same again... for the new normal that no one can fully describe right now, but that we know will be.

I want to mention just two of these anticipated changes that your staff and session are working on right now. All indications are that your return to church – and by that, I mean your return to this building and all of the programs that once took place in this building – will be gradual and it will be slow. Though you really miss gathering together and may really want to come back... for many reasons many of you are hesitant to gather as we once did. This reality is giving our church the opportunity to grow in at least two ways. First, it is giving us the opportunity to grow our **digital ministry**... to expand our online reach - both to you our members and to those who we have not yet met. Pastor Carey Nieuwhof writes blog that I have found helpful during this time and in a recent post he said: "I will never win popularity contests when I write about this, but it's just too important to ignore. Growing churches in the future will become digital organizations with physical expressions, not physical organizations with a digital presence."² Allow me to say that again... Growing churches in the future will become digital organizations with physical expressions, not physical organizations with a digital presence. Now, he's certainly right about one thing – statements like that won't make him popular with a lot of church folk for whom the very definition of church is being together with each other. But I think he's also right about the importance (and really the necessity) of using digital resources for God's glory and the building up of Christ's church. Christians will always need and want to gather together – it's just part of being human to long for person-to-person connection. So, our church will continue to value in-person, face-to-face gatherings and services. But COVID has clearly revealed the importance of digital ministry to the life of the church in 2020. Digital is not going away... it will only grow and advance... and as Carey Nieuwhof says, "... in the future church, if you care about people, you'll care about the digital church."

The second opportunity this time of separation is offering us has to do with how we continue to grow in our faith when we cannot be together. Friends, one of the realities COVID has exposed for a church like ours is just how dependent our spiritual formation is on the things that happen in this building... when we are together in this building – worship, Sunday school, Bible studies, knitting groups, Scouts, Wednesday night suppers, Presbyterian Women meetings, youth gatherings, choir practice, (even committee meetings!)... and the list goes on and on. For generations we have been a church whose spiritual formation is centered here in this building... where it has been led by our pastors and staff. Yet, our forced separation from most of that has shown us that we all need to assume more responsibility for our own spiritual growth... for the spiritual growth of our children and families... and for our own fellowship and mission. An unspoken assumption of the old model of church was that to grow, you had to come to a facility and participate in a program or service. And let me tell you, we pastors loved it when you came!

² Carey Nieuwhof, "3 Things That Are Sabotaging the Church's Future," at: careynieuwhof.com

But in the future, we will be working hard to equip you to bring faith more deeply into your home and places of work and neighborhoods... and not just on Sunday or Wednesday, but every day. To this end, this fall we are planning a digital Front Porch Sunday school class which will be accompanied by a sermon series based on five essential spiritual practices which are rooted in Jesus' own walk with God. We all need these tools that our faith offers us as we continue our walk with Christ. Finally, this. I titled this sermon "The Main Thing" – though you wouldn't know that since you don't have a bulletin in your hand. It's a reference to much-used quote by Steven Covey, author of the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People... where he says: "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Now, the repetition might drive an English teacher up the wall, but this is Covey's way of reminding us that our mission is the main thing... and the main thing for us as a church is to keep our mission the main thing. Too often though we get our mission mixed up with our methods. Mission is why the church exists... it's why Jesus gathered disciples and made them apostles and sent them into the world to point to him... to be his heart and his hands and his feet. Our methods are how we do that... how we try to accomplish the mission we've been given. Singing out of a hymnbook or from words on a screen are methods... Sunday school is a method... Wednesday Night Supper is a method... mission trips are a method. And one of the things that COVID has done is to take many of our most beloved methods and say, "Uh-uh... you can't do that right now... and you may not be able to do that for a very long time." That's one reason this has been so hard... we get very fond of our methods... we are comfortable with our methods... we hate to think about changing our methods. Yet, what we are learning right now is what generations of Christians before us had to learn – that our methods are not sacred. The mission – and only the mission – is sacred. The church has always adapted its worship and programs for the time in which it lives. But the mission, Christ's mission, remains constant. Today, my friends, we are being called to keep our methods fluid, nimble, flexible... while keeping our mission sacred, central... and always the main thing. Amen.

Benediction

I have told you before that these past months have been hard for me...

I've just experienced lots of grief over what has been lost
and the uncertainty as to when it might be restored.

I say that not to gain your sympathy,
but as a way to say that I am just as fond of our methods as anyone –
I love our methods...

am comfortable with our methods...

grieve the loss of our methods.

The Baby Boomers among us

may remember Joni Mitchell's classic lyric:

"You don't know what you've got till it's gone." That's me!

Now, the truth is I believe that in some form

we will once again experience many of our most-beloved methods –

worship, Wednesday night supper, choir practice, committee meetings.

Yet, as much as I am grieving right now,

I am also excited about the future...
and how this entire experience offers us the possibility
to think new thoughts and do new things.

Thursday, I watched two webinars
focusing on how the church
might celebrate and experience Advent and Christmas
this year when things are so different.

A month ago, I was worried about that... today I am excited.

Which calls to mind one of my favorite quotes by Walter Brueggemann
who said: "The world for which you have been so carefully prepared
is being taken away from you by the grace of God."

As hard as that is to believe... and even harder to experience,
I believe it with all my heart.