

Deacon Announcement – May 17, 2020

Back in the middle of March, based on guidance from the CDC, Governor Ricketts announced a statewide limit of gatherings of more than 10 people. Although the initial mandate was intended to be for two weeks, by the end of March, the mandate had become enforceable and in-person worship services here at Bethesda were suspended. This was the same week that Heartland Community Schools closed for the conclusion of the 2019 academic year.

Pastors, staff and volunteers continued to work to offer regular worship services through Livestream, and even expanded the availability engaging to our local cable network. We have continued to operate board and committee meetings, Catechism, Bible studies and prayer meetings through ZOOM and other online venues. While we recognize the limitations and difficulties of these digital venues, we felt it important to offer opportunities to talk, pray and continue to engage with others in relationship to our faith. We have received feedback from our community and even in states as far away as California and Virginia that our continued digital presence has been valuable in this disorienting time.

This sort of closure, is a traumatic event in the lives of a community like ours and the pastors and deacons have received a wide range of responses from individuals in the congregation which have spanned from gratitude to out-right anger. This is further complicated by the fact that this situation has been hijacked and turned into a politicalized litmus test. If you wear a mask, you're a liberal. If you don't you're a conservative. And from our perspective as church leaders, this is not only unhelpful, it's downright false.

Over the past weeks, we as pastors and deacons have had conversation with members of nearly all active involved households in our congregation. And we have discovered that there are not two sides to this situation. There are very many. Some are afraid because they have on-going health concerns which would make COVID-19 particularly dangerous if they were to become infected. Some have family members who have already had the illness and know the difficulties it causes. Some are medical professionals or have medical professionals in their families who have treated and lost patients to COVID-19. Some have no experience with it and wonder if it is even something to be worried about. Some, even acknowledging the reality of the illness want to be able to return to some sense of normalcy in life. I could go on and on. There are no sides, there are individual experiences and stories which have shaped a diverse set of perspectives.

So what do we do when there so many differing perspectives on how to respond during these anxious times?

First we must recognize that these are anxious times and it is natural for us to behave and respond out of our anxiety. We may experience worry and what if fears, we may feel threatened and panic, we may be irritable and want to attack others or defend ourselves, we may judge others and how they are responding.

While it is natural for people to behave this way that doesn't mean it is beneficial or constructive. We read in 1 Corinthians during a time of division in the church that no one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

Jesus molded this for us in the midst of his own anxious times. He responded with respect and love even to those who disagreed with him. In Ephesians 4 Paul advises the church - Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.

Disrespectful, demeaning, and divisive speech about anyone else is just not allowed for Christians. Only those things which encourage and build up the community should be spoken.

So as we move forward into the unknown may we by the power of the Holy Spirit, model Christ to a watching world.

On May 4, the Governor and state Department of Health and Human Services relaxed the Directed Health Measures for our county. At the same time, they issued a new set of Guidelines for conducting faith-based worship services – including new guidelines for funerals and weddings. If you would like to review this document, a link has been placed on our website. Over the past week and a half, the Deacons and pastors have been evaluating how we might conduct services while abiding by the new guidelines. What has become evident is that services will not look or feel the same immediately upon resuming services. However, the Deacons and Pastors do feel that we have a plan to open the sanctuary to those who want to attend worship in person and are proposing we allow for in person attendance beginning on Sunday, May 31.

This effort will require coordination with several boards and committees in the next couple of days. The deacons will be reaching out to share the plan and collaborate to accommodate those wishing to be in attendance. If all goes according to our plans, we will be spending next week during the announcements portion of the Livestream service to articulate the details to you. These directions will be also placed on our website. Please continue to be in prayer for our community, our congregation, and those navigating the new guidelines to be open for worship.