

Blessings, Everyone!

Let me begin by updating everyone on how I am doing with the shelter-in-place restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic.

As I may have mentioned before, I thought that this would be a piece of cake for me. I am an introvert and I love reading books. I am not afraid to be alone, to be by myself, to be with myself. As David Lee Roth (the front man for Van Halen) once said, "I know I live in my own little world, but at least everyone there likes me!"

When I was young, on those rare occasions when I teased my younger brother, my mother would "punish me" by sending me to my room. Since I normally shared the room with my brother, being in the room alone with my books and my radio was not really much of a punishment. It was sort of like Brer Rabbit pleading with Brer Fox, "Whatever you do, don't throw me in that briar patch!" (BTW, I understand that there is a movement to change Splash Mountain at Disneyworld because the overall theme, exemplified in the above quote from Brer Rabbit is racist. Really??)

I never told my mother that her choice of punishment was not really effective. For some reason, I feel better now that I have finally gotten this off my chest.

While I am on the topic of confessing, cleansing my soul of the dark stain of things I have done that I ought not to have done and things I have left undone that I ought to have done, I need to tell you that I have not been taking my daily walks with our dog. I just haven't felt like it. I also have not been great about keeping my vow to meditate for a half hour every day. Some days I have just been too busy, or I have had things on my mind. (I know, this isn't a great excuse not to meditate.) I have done pretty well with reading a book a week, but I would like to point out, in my defense, that some books are longer and more difficult to read than others.

I feel better. Thanks for listening.

In addition to still not sleeping well, I have discovered that my energy level and my productivity are more closely tied to the rituals of my daily life than I thought. Actually, I have had the exact same weekly schedule for the past twenty-five years—at least until last year when I retired from teaching at Assumption College. My counseling practice was (and is) scheduled for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday; Assumption College on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, First Community Church Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, Tuesday night, and Sunday morning. I wrote my sermons on Saturdays or whenever I had both a spare hour and a little inspiration during the week.

This (I hope) will help to explain why I am several weeks behind in getting my printed sermons to you and several months behind in providing David Crane with the audio version. I have discovered that my sermons are more closely tied to our Sunday morning worship than I realized.

When I left Pilgrim Church in 1972 to become the Protestant Chaplain to Foxborough State Hospital, I realized how important the writing and preaching of my sermons were to my own theological and spiritual growth. I vowed to write a sermon every week, even though there was no opportunity to preach it (we had a very simple service at Foxborough State Hospital). The practice writing of sermons in the abstract lasted almost a month.

I have come to realize that my sermons and also my teaching arise within the context of a community of faith, of our community of faith. They arise out of our relationship, out of our shared values, out of the existential crises with which we all struggle. They are not my sermons; they are our sermons. As I write them, I think of some of you to whom they may be speaking, to whom they may be helpful. They are always speaking to me.

This is a long way of saying that I look forward to the day when we can be back together as the gathered church. It is just not the same without you!

Last week, I met with the Diaconate to discuss the matter of reopening. I know that many churches are already doing this. None of us at the meeting thought this was a good idea—not now, not in July, not in August, maybe not even in September. There is just too much of a risk. We will also not be celebrating weddings or holding memorial services at the church until we are able to resume gathering safely. The Diaconate and I are planning to meet again in August to see where we all are with this pandemic, to see what makes sense.

I have a feeling that we are all on the same page in this. Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should. As the apostle Paul said, all things are lawful for me but not all things are beneficial. And right now, to be together in groups, even with masks, is not beneficial. Darlene and I are avoiding public gatherings like the plague (get it?!).

At our meeting, we reviewed the guidelines that have been established for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (and echoed by Brigham & Women's Hospital). They are as follows:

1. We need to follow the guidelines for cleaning the sanctuary and bathroom after every service;
2. We will need to change the way we do communion—perhaps prefilled cups of grape juice and pieces of bread in a little paper cup to be picked up by communicants as they enter the church or by coming forward observing social distancing during the communion service;
3. We need to sit a minimum of 6' apart; members of a household can sit together. We will need to rope off every other pew;
4. We cannot pass the offering plate to each other; it can be left at the back of the sanctuary;
5. We will pick up our own bulletin as we enter the church;
6. We will enter and leave through the front door only (unless someone needs to use the chair lift);

7. We may have a greeter to keep parishioners moving, not congregating as usual, and to remind them to respect social distancing;
8. We will need to put together a revised Order of Service:
 - a. No choir introit, anthem, etc.
 - b. No singing hymns, etc.
 - c. No handling the hymnbooks or Bibles
 - d. No Passing of the Peace
 - e. NO COFFEE HOUR—at least for a while
 - f. Michael I and can put together a service with many of the elements of our normal order of service: lots of music (organ, piano, cd's), prayers, scripture lessons, and a sermon.

I think we can do something very nice, very meaningful, very worshipful. The Rules/Guidelines will be posted on each of the doors of the church; I will also send them out to all of you well in advance of our reopening. We also considered taking the cushions off the pews (not to make you uncomfortable, but to make you safer).

We will, of course, be considering the guidelines proposed by the Southeast New England Conference of the United Church of Christ, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, area hospitals, and other churches in our area as they unfold.

I hope this makes sense to all of you. As you know, we have already lost four of our beloved church members over the past two months. With all the uncertainty surrounding those who test positive but are relatively asymptomatic, we need to proceed with an abundance of caution. Too many of us (most of us) are in the vulnerable category.

I will be communicating more regularly with you (hopefully weekly) in the weeks to come.

My thoughts and prayers are with you. Please let me know if there is anything I or we can do to help you through these difficult times.

We look forward to meeting once again as the gathered church. In the meantime, let us be with each other, with our country, and with the world in prayer.

Be well. Be safe. Keep the faith.
Pastor Paul