

Saturday, May 30, 2020

Dear City Reformed,

We are in the midst of a moment of history that will be remembered for years to come. We have all of the things that make for an interesting story and a hard time in which to live: medical pandemic, economic concern, political polarization, ongoing racial injustice and unrest... And just when it seems like things couldn't get worse, we are told that the murder hornets are continuing their advance. There is a lot of hard stuff going on. I've been meditating a lot on Hebrews 11-12 and our call to "run with endurance the race set before us, looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith." That implies two things. First, in all circumstances we continue as we have begun – by looking to Jesus. Second, we take things a step at a time. Here are some of the next steps we are taking as a church.

In Christ,



Pastor Matt

Going Green

On Friday, May 29, Governor Wolf announced that Allegheny County will be moving into the Green Phase of reopening, effective Friday, June 5. It is important to understand that the Governor's Green Phase does not mean that we are returning to the way life as it was in early March. We are still advised to observe social distancing measures and be cautious in our interactions. Unlike the move from Red to Yellow, it seems less clear what this change will mean for our church and how this will impact our maximum attendance for Sunday Worship Service. During the next week we will begin to evaluate various steps we can take to move towards greater "in-person" participation in the worship service. If this is best accomplished by returning to Winchester Thurston, we will have to navigate their directives for building use under the Green Phase. This is what we do know - we envision a series of incremental steps over the course of the coming weeks and not a single massive change. Throughout these steps we will keep a close eye on the unfolding situation in our region as we consider how our practices can best reflect the dual concerns of public worship and community health. We are committed to continuing our livestream broadcast of the worship service so as to include all people who may not prefer to attend the service in person.

Pentecost Celebration

On Sunday, May 31, City Reformed will celebrate world missions at our annual "Pentecost Service." I would like to share some reflections here, so that I can keep my introductory comments shorter tomorrow.

In Protestant Church history, Pentecost Sunday was one of the three major church events on the yearly calendar (along with Christmas and Easter.) While it has fallen out of favor in North American Churches, it is still recognized by Protestants in other parts of the world. On this Sunday, we will remember the first Pentecost Sunday almost 2,000 years ago, when the Holy Spirit was poured out, equipping the church for the work of world missions (Acts 2). The extraordinary work of the Spirit on that day enabled each person in Jerusalem to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their own language. While City Reformed does not expect this extraordinary outpouring to be normative for all of Church life, the real message of Pentecost is that God equips his people for service to the nations.

On Pentecost Sunday, each part of our service will reflect this aspect. We will sing songs that celebrate the world-wide spread of the Christian faith. Members will pray in a foreign language (with English translation). The sermon will focus on how Jesus anticipated the world-wide mission of the church even during his earthly ministry. After the announcements, we will hear a special presentation from two college students who have traveled to serve with a Native American ministry in the American Northwest called Sacred Road Ministry.

As we celebrate the world-wide spread of the Christian faith, we will be reminded that God's purpose in salvation is to redeem a people from throughout the whole earth. The Bible starts with a promise to bless all people groups through Abraham, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ opens the door to that blessing to all people by faith. The New Testament books help churches to wrestle through the very practical challenges of maintaining a congregation where Jews and Gentiles of every background struggle to live together in harmony. Finally, the Bible ends with a grand vision of heaven, in which people from "every tribe, and tongue, and nation" worship before the throne of God. The story of Pentecost reminds us about the great story of redemption that God is weaving through history and across the globe.

When we refresh our perspective on that story, as the *great* story of all time, it has two effects on us. Both of these things are incredibly relevant in our current moment. First, it causes us to see some really concerning matters against a bigger backdrop. In so doing, it can put our current problems in perspective. Second, it stretches our concern to include people outside of our own group.

Keeping our Reopening in Perspective

Right now, the world is enduring a health crisis that is unprecedented for my lifetime. COVID-19 is a harmful disease that has killed over 100,000 Americans in spite of vigorous efforts to suppress the spread of infection. At the same time, the closure of businesses and public spaces has led to record levels of unemployment in the United States. Both of these issues have tremendous impacts on real people and can feel like they are overwhelming. The stakes feel so high, and anxiety can be raised quickly. In an already polarized and anxious cultural moment, this new public health challenge provides one more platform for acrimony and accusation. (From my perspective, members of City Reformed have been keeping their heads in this difficult time, but one glance at the national conversation can cause real discouragement.)

I believe that Pentecost Sunday delivers the message that we most need. As we turn our gaze back to God's great redemptive purposes in the world, we can see our (admittedly large) problems in their proper perspective. And when we do, it can help to reduce our anxiety and see things more clearly. The message of Pentecost is this: God is at work in the world. He is working in the power of the Holy Spirit to extend the Kingdom of Jesus Christ to every group of people. In spite of human sin, systemic oppression, demonic opposition, political hostility, or any other force that arrays itself against the purposes of God... God will triumph. Along the way, things can get hard. This infection could still get worse before it gets better. The worst of the economic pinch may still be ahead of us. But God will accomplish his purposes. We can take a deep breath, re-tie our shoelaces and continue the long trek of endurance.

Extending our Concerns to Minneapolis

On one hand, the centrality of God's eternal and world-wide kingdom puts our immediate challenges in perspective. On the other hand, it forces us to recognize the weightiness of problems that are outside of our immediate spheres of concern. Many of us are aware from the news that racial tensions have flared up across the country in recent weeks. Prosecutorial delays in Georgia have fomented concern, and this past week, the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis stirred outrage across the nation. Discussions have dominated social media and talk shows. Protestors have voiced their anger, and harmful riots have erupted, threatening the very communities most concerned by this event. It is hard to see how there can be redemptive solutions in the immediate future. In the meantime, we can pray for justice and peace. We can also consider the needs of those groups involved and pray for them with real concern. Pentecost reminds us that God's kingdom draws people together who do not otherwise have common backgrounds or common concerns. Here are some voices that can help stretch our perspectives and guide our prayers. These are windows into complex issues that call us to mourn with those who mourn and pray for the coming of God's rule on earth.

The chief of police in Pittsburgh offered a [clear statement on his perspective](#) of the death of George Floyd, the event that sparked recent unrest. We know that national events can put pressure on police officers throughout the country, even when they had no direct connection to the particular event. The coming weeks can be very hard.

The unrest and violence that emerged later in the week is a particular threat to the stores and residents of Minneapolis and St. Paul "twin" cities. [The mayor of St. Paul has spoken to condemn violence and its impact on his city.](#)

The circumstances of George Floyd's death were disturbing to many who have watched the videos. But the incident stirred deep anger and pain among many African American brothers and sisters who experience this particular event against the backdrop of a long struggle for civil liberties. Rev. Lance Lewis, who preached at our church last fall, wrote about his personal feelings in regard to this event:

We are struggling mightily. The weight of deep grief, frustration, anger, and anxiety are overwhelming. We feel as though we're at the beginning of a long psalm of lament and can just weakly utter a feeble cry for our Lord's help without knowing when that help will arrive and how long we'll grapple with our feelings of lostness, powerlessness, and despair.

We feel He's given us over to an enemy without mercy who rages against us for no other reason than being created in His image with dark skin.

We have little or no hope in America, its president, and sadly much of its evangelical church. We are numb with pain, find ourselves staring blankly at our walls unable to go on with our 'regular' work.

It seems that so many just want to 'return to normal' when for us 'normal' is sickening. Yes, we want and need justice, but deep down know it won't bring wholeness.

We are broken, weary, and know that for us the words 'this world is not our home' aren't just Christian jargon. They are our lived reality day after heartbroken day.

Come, Lord Jesus, come, Lord Jesus, please, please, please come quickly Lord Jesus.