

3/13/20

Dear All Souls Family,

Many of you are wondering how the coronavirus pandemic will affect what we do as a church family. Let me say a couple of things that I hope will be helpful. First, to answer a question that a number of you have been asking, we will continue to meet for worship. In the Christian life we need to encourage one another (1 Th 5:11; Heb 10:25) and draw near to our Father together (Heb 4:16). This is especially true in times of difficulty (see the context of both the letter to the Thessalonians and that of the letter of Hebrews). It is easy to be tempted to fear, worry, anxiety, and paranoia. We need to continue to point one another to the love and sovereignty of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus.

That said, while we don't want to overreact, we do want to respond with wisdom. So, a few practical items.

- We will follow any guidelines handed down by the CDC or other local, state, or federal agencies, which will include cancelling services, should that be required.
- The Y has instituted some new cleaning procedures "to maintain the most sanitary environment possible."
- We will not have food before the service for the next few weeks. Feel free to continue to come, hang out, talk, fellowship. We'll just remove that element since touching and passing food can touch and pass other things as well.
- We love the fact that we are a close congregation and that many shake hands or hug when they greet each other. This is a situation in which it is okay to set aside Paul's admonition to greet one another with a holy kiss *for a time*. So, please consider other ways to welcome one another.
- We will likely still have communion on the first week of the month. But, we will change the way we partake of communion so that we don't have to pass the plates.
- We will put the collection plates at the back of the sanctuary, so that you can give as you enter/exit, again, so we don't have to pass the plates. Also, by way of reminder, you can give online, electronically through our website and at <https://app.securegive.com/allsoulsorca>.
- We will begin to livestream our services, and possibly Sunday School, this week. What this means: if you are sick, or experiencing any cold or flu-like symptoms, stay home and

participate via livestream. We will make sure we send out a link *both* to the livestream and to a file with song lyrics and the bulletin so you are able to participate as fully as possible. To seniors and those at higher health risk, we encourage you to use your best judgment. Should you, or anyone else, choose to stay home, again, you will continue to be able to participate via livestream. Clearly, livestream is *not* a substitute for church. We believe very much in the body, both physical and corporate, which require physical presence. We can encourage one another with a look, a touch, and the sound of our voice. But, there are exceptions, and our present circumstance is one of those exceptions. If you do decide to stay home and would like a call from one of the elders, please let us know. Also, if you know anyone who is sick and staying home, please let the elders know so that we can call and encourage them.

Those are some practical items, but our response, as a church, must be more than this. There is also a theological response. Whenever suffering and trials come people begin to ask questions. So how do we respond?

- First, I would say, nothing has changed. That may seem flippant, but it is not intended as such. God is still sovereign and good. The world is still broken by sin. Our hope continues to be *not* in this age, but in the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection to come. This is what Christians have always confessed, and the present circumstances are consistent with our confession.
- Second, suffering and trials are always meant to be a means to point God's children to the care and arms of our loving heavenly Father. Difficulties remind us that this life cannot satisfy and cannot save. We need to look beyond the present age for satisfaction and safety. We are secure only in the arms of our Father who has demonstrated the extent of His love in the cross (Jn 3:16). Sometimes turning to Him means repentance and renewed faith. Sometimes it means persevering in faith and resting in the gospel. Either way, look to your Father who loves you, Jesus who died for you, and the Spirit who is present with you in the midst of your trials.
- Third, you do not need to live in fear. David proclaimed, "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?" (Ps 56:3-4). Now, if you read the rest of the psalm you find out, there is plenty that can happen in this life. David's point is not that there aren't real dangers, but that God is bigger than those dangers and can care for us in the midst of them. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus, our shepherd is with us and will watch over us (Ps 23:4; Jn 10:11ff).

- Fourth, the ultimate reason we don't need to fear is the resurrection. Christ has defeated death. By removing sin, death is no longer something we need to fear (Heb 2:14–15). In fact, to die is gain says Paul (Php 1:21), and to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Co 5:8). We no longer need to fear death, because we know that death, while it means separation from our bodies for a time, means to be ushered into the presence of our Father. This reality was so pressed on Paul's mind, he wasn't sure which he preferred, to live or to die (Php 2:23). Of course, that is not up to us. God has placed us here for fruitful work so that whether we live or die we glorify Him (Ro 14:8). On top of that, we know, that though we die, yet we will live (Jn 11:25) and we will rise from the dead to dwell with Christ forever in the new heavens and new earth one day (1 Co 15:50–57; Rv 21:1–4). Death does not have the final word.
- Fifth, all of this should free us to love. Our temptations in trials like this is to blame and circle the wagons. Rather than look for a scapegoat, we should seek to show mercy and love to those in need. And rather than hoard, we should give as God has given to us, liberally and sacrificially. Christians in history were known for caring for the sick, even at the expense of their own lives. In that way they pictured the sacrificial love of Jesus. We should be ready to give of ourselves for the good of others at this time as individuals and as a church as we have opportunity.
- Sixth, this giving of ourselves includes giving a reason for the hope that is in us (1 Pt 3:15). Even as we struggle to face our fears with hope, we should recognize that there are fearful people all around who don't have the hope of the gospel to rest in at all. As you have opportunity, take the time to encourage those around you to look to Christ. Even if you feel inadequate you can 1.) know that God uses our fumbling and stumbling witness to his grace by the power of His Spirit, and 2.) point people to Scripture, sermons, blog-posts, etc., which can help them understand the hope that is ours in Jesus.

The final thing I need to say is please pray. Paul calls us to pray when we are anxious, so that we might find peace as we rest in the coming of our Lord (Php 4:5–7). Pray for our country. Pray for our church family. Pray for those who are at risk. Pray for our witness. Pray that even here the love of Christ would shine forth through the church and God would be glorified.

May God be glorified and his grace be known as we serve him now and always.

Pastor Luke

3/14/20

*“Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.””
(Jas 4:13–15)*

We really don't know what tomorrow will bring. After receiving a little more information about local government recommendations for churches, we have decided to go all online for our adult Sunday school and worship service for the next few weeks. Children's and high school Sunday school will be cancelled.

Adult Sunday school will be online via zoom, so that participation will still be a possibility. Zoom is an application that anyone can put on their computers that will allow you to join a group meeting electronically. You can find out more at zoom.us. It is free for all participants. You can use this link each week we have online Sunday school (<https://zoom.us/j/103306879>). If you'd like help getting this set up on your computer, please let us know.

Worship will be online via livestream. We will send out a link for that as well as a link to the bulletin and hymn lyrics.

Use wise judgment. Keep the health of others in mind. But, consider gathering in smaller groups in homes to participate in these online events. Smaller groups are meant to minimize the risk of spreading the infection.

For midweek small groups, check with your small group leader to see what you will be doing. The WSC small group will be hosted via zoom. You can use this link for the WSC small group (<https://zoom.us/j/893680511>). Again, feel free to gather with others and join the small group together. Gathering physically, even as “two or three” allows us to encourage one another, which is especially necessary in the face of uncertainty.

We do not want to be ruled by fear, but we do want to be wise and loving to others, especially to those who are at higher risk. These precautions are one way of being loving to others by reducing our chance of spreading the coronavirus.

Since most of these technological things are new to us as a church, please be patient with us as we try to make all of this work (and pray for us!).

Please feel free to contact an elder if you have any questions or would like counsel, encouragement, or prayer or if you know someone in that position.

5/25/20

Dear All Souls Family,

I am incredibly thankful to God for how well our current arrangement for worship and small groups has worked. Who would have thought at the beginning of 2020 that we would be doing 7–8 Zoom meetings each week as a church? In many ways we have continued without hiccup in our adult Sunday school class, our small groups, our monthly prayer meeting, and, of course, our worship service. While no one thinks it is ideal to worship together via Zoom, I am grateful to God for how well this has worked for us, and thankful to many people who have worked hard to make this happen. I hesitate, as some have, to use the phrase “virtual worship,” as we are really and truly worshipping together, if under less than ideal circumstances. It is not virtual worship, though it *is* remote. But that we can worship together remotely, for that we thank God.

There are many issues to consider as we move toward returning to physical gatherings after the current stay-at-home orders begin to be relaxed. There are theological issues, legal issues, & health issues. There are various individual viewpoints in the church, issues regarding the Y itself, practical and logistical issues, best practices, and just plain common sense. And there are also issues regarding our witness and the best way to love our neighbor.

This morning I want to mention what we see as our next step as a church. As elders we have discussed this issue a number of times. But, because there are so many factors and things are changing so fast, we are only planning out the next step as there are too many unknown variables to plot out the steps after that.

Our goal, of course, is a few basic things that I hope we all want. We all want to return to our regular worship, being physically present with one another (Ro 1:11; 15:23; 1 Th 3:6; 2 Ti 1:4). We also all want to protect those who are most vulnerable in our midst, and to love our neighbor by not ourselves spreading the coronavirus (Lv 19:18; Mt 22:39; Jas 1:27). These biblical goals need to shape our thinking here. We also want to be wise (Jas 1:5; 3:13), be obedient to civil authority (Ro 13:1; Tt 3:1; 1 Pt 2:13), and be lovingly cautious without fear (Mt 6:25; Lk 14:27; Php 4:6).

I should say that Latzer hall, where we normally gather for worship, is about to undergo renovations, something that has been planned for this summer, but has not yet begun. And so, returning to Latzer in any numbers is simply not a possibility for us at this point.

I should also say, whereas normally we put our Sunday school classes on hold for the summer and change the time of our service, our plan is to continue our current Sunday school class for the next seven weeks (to finish it out). And we will not be changing to our “summer schedule” as long as we are not able to meet in person.

Now, to the next step forward.

As of this upcoming Friday, Illinois likely will have moved into “phase 3.” Given that, and all that it entails, you may consider meeting in groups (of up to 10 people) for our worship service in one another’s homes. Now, this is certainly as your conscience allows, using wisdom, following current legal requirements and continuing to practice good hygiene. It is also recognizing that not everyone in the church will feel comfortable with this, and we need to practice a good deal of humility, charity, and patience, even with one another, at this time (Ro 14; 1 Cor 8, 13). There are various viewpoints within the church and we must not judge one another on issues that Scripture does not directly address.

What this gathering together might look like is this: if you are comfortable with it, invite others into your home for worship, to join our Zoom service remotely *together*. Again I should say, use wisdom and follow legal and health guidelines. If you move in this direction, you must talk with one another about what you are each comfortable with before you gather, so everyone knows what the rules of engagement will be. You might decide as a group to worship outside, for example, so that you can sing without greater chance of spreading the virus should anyone have it unknowingly. Again, patience and charity with one another will be key.

Of course, if you are in one of the high-risk categories, it makes sense that you would not feel comfortable with this step forward and that is completely fine. We are not asking anybody to do anything that they feel would be putting themselves or others at risk.

I do want to encourage us all, however, that our focus here should not be primarily self-protection, but love (Ga 5:13). How can I love my family well, love my neighbors well, love my church well? Most of us at All Souls are healthy. We are not in the high-risk categories for COVID-19. And so our not meeting physically is a matter of love, not self-protection. That means if we are called upon to act in love toward someone in need (and potentially exposing ourselves to the coronavirus in that act of love), we will do so without concern for our own bodily safety.

We can proceed in love, of course, only if we are not afraid. And we do not need to fear because of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has risen from the grave and conquered death (Ac 2:24). On the last day we will rise with him (1 Co 15:23; 1 Th 4:16). Death has lost its sting (1 Co

15:54–57). Though the earth gives way, and the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, we need not fear (Ps 46:2). God will deliver us from the deadly pestilence one way or another (Ps 91:3). He is able to deliver us from all physical ailments in this life. But if not, we still need not fear, because we know this life is not the end (Dan 3:18). We hope in the resurrection (1 Pt 1:3–5). So let us not fear. And let us not fear so *that* we might love well. In this too, then, we love others because God has first loved us, and because his perfect love casts out all fear (1 Jn 4:18–19).

5/25/21

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” —Philippians 2:1–11

As we move back into in person morning services, we are going to move step by step.

What we have done as a congregation up to this point we have done freely and for the safety and protection of all involved. We have always known we would move too slowly for some and too quickly for others. But what we have done, we have done because we thought it was in the best interest of our congregation. And we actually think we have done a pretty good job so far. Perfect? Not likely. But we have sought to be prayerful, faithful, thoughtful and loving throughout this past year. We want to continue our thoughtful, intentional activity as we move toward in person morning services.

Now, for the sake of the body, and so that as many people as possible feel comfortable returning, we are going to ask everyone attending to do two things:

First, do your best to maintain social distance. Even if you would feel comfortable getting a little closer, respect where other people are, and keep that six foot distance.

Second, leave masks on the whole time, except for communion. Of course, wearing a mask means covering not just your mouth, but also your nose. As someone said wittily, it's a face mask, not a chin strap. ;)

Those who lead in worship will remove their masks while speaking, but we think are far enough away from the congregation for there to be no likely transfer even if one of the leaders should have COVID.

If you are not comfortable coming, that is okay. We respect that. Now, I would say if you are comfortable going to the grocery store, or a bar, or other crowded or indoor area in the city, this is just as safe. I would encourage you to come. If you are still not comfortable, again, that is okay. We will continue to zoom the service for all to be able to participate.

If you are uncomfortable wearing a mask, let me say, this is a way we can support each other so we can be together. We should value the fellowship of the body more highly than whether we get to remove our mask or not. We must love as Christ loved, giving up our rights for the sake of the other.

Every side of this issue needs to show grace to one another here. Grace means being willing to put my preferences to death for the sake of another. And grace means forbearing and forgiving and not holding onto bitterness if people differ in opinion from you.

Finally, let me beseech you, please continue to pray for the unity of our church. Sadly, this kind of thing has polarized and divided many Christians. It need not do that. Our unity is in Christ. And we should always be willing to give up our preferences for the sake of the other. If we are walking in light of Philippians 2, the unity of the body will be maintained and Christ will be glorified. Please pray with me earnestly to that end.