

*Transcript of announcement from All Souls Worship Service 5/24/20:*

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 gather and 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 selfprotection, 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).

Grace and Peace,

*Pastor Luke*

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