

Statement from Pastor Sandy on March 15, 2020 regarding COVID-19

To our church family and other community members with us today,

Tommy, myself, and the rest of the SPUMC staff recognize that it is unnerving to hear that churches have suspended in-person gatherings.

This sounds counterintuitive to do during a time when people need community, a time when people need support, a time when people are fearful and need comfort of prayer and connection.

Yet, we have to acknowledge that “large gatherings” can become hotbeds for the spreading of this novel disease. And even in our best efforts to limit greetings, suspend passing of the peace, and modify communion practices, at this moment, the best way to care and show love for our church family and community is to keep physical distance.

It is painful. It is hard. It is sad.

But this is the compassionate way to move forward at this time as we commit ourselves to ensuring the safety of those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19.

At this moment in time, we are scheduled to resume in-person gatherings on Sunday, March 29. We will continually keep you updated through on our website (www.southernpinesumc.org), social media platforms (@sopinesumc), email, and phone calls.

Know that Tommy and I are in regular communication with local clergy and know we are all committed to providing the best love and care for our community.

Furthermore, may we all continue to be dedicated in continuing in God’s mission in this time of uncertainty. Just because there is physical distance through the practice of social distancing does not mean we cannot continue to be one in Christ.

- Be in prayer for our staff, our community here, our state, our nation, and across the globe.
- Please check in on your neighbors. Your older neighbors, your neighbors on chemo, your neighbor who still has to work and needs help with childcare. Find creative ways to reach out and help those in proximity.
 - Most importantly practice good hygiene.
 - Call, write cards, support caretakers unable to reach those they love. There are still plenty of ways to stay connected in spirit and care for one another.
- Please also check in with yourself and your family. Without the usual rush of things to do and check off, this can become a time of stillness with your family. Downtime can be a gift and spending time with family can become worshipful in their own way. May you take this opportunity to connect with God and others.

On Worry: Peace in Uncertainty

Luke 12:1-34 (only reading out loud select verses: 22-31)

March 15, 2020

Lenten Series

What does it mean to live?

To be living?

Many of us, especially in the frenzy of preparation and additional stressors regarding institutional closures, have been living in a state of tunnel vision of the me, myself, and mine.

We see on the news and social media the extremes of this tunnel vision:

people concerned with trying to immunize themselves from shortage
by accumulating and hoarding resources
like disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizers
from places that are in current need.

So easily do we fall into the traps of wanting to ease and escape future worries,
to avoid hardships,
that we grab and cling on, and try to protect and hide ourselves.

Our thoughts track the rabbit trails of contingency plans
and give ourselves some sense of control over uncontrollable situations.

Irritation sets in

when environments and people don't go according to plan.

Worries become stoked by fear

Our hands clench, our nails dig into our lives

A tightness wraps around our chest and restrains our breathing

Each movement is strained with inflexibility.

While fear-fueled anxiety feeds its lies into our minds.

Is this what it means to be living?

When we look at Luke's 12th chapter as a whole,

Jesus' teaching about worry comes after a parable of the rich fool

Someone who thought they could

"immunize themselves from the hardship of life

by accumulating more and more possessions,

only to discover

that [they] cannot escape death itself."¹

A timely teaching...

What should we do

when the mortality of our bodies are suddenly made real again?

To discover the futility of our efforts in the bird's eye view of things?

¹ Magnet R. deVega. *Embracing the Uncertain: A Lenten Study for Unsteady Times*. 38.: Abingdon Press, 2017. Print.

“Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come?” Songwriter Civilla D. Martin In 1905 asks. “Why should my heart be lonely and long for heaven and home / When Jesus Is my portion? My constant friend is he: / his eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.”²

Martin’s lyrics offer an important reminder of Jesus’ teaching.

Rather than longing for

“a better time and a better place

beyond the miseries and sufferings of this life,

[we] ought to focus Instead on the presence of God

in the here and now, amid the struggles of today.”³

It is a shift in how we process the world,

and it is an *important shift* to understand Jesus’ teaching.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear.

For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.

Of how much more value are you than the birds!

² Civilla D. Martin. “His Eye is on the Sparrow” from *The Faith We Sing*. 2146. Stanza 1. Abingdon Press, 2006. Print.

³ deVega 36. Emphasis added.

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

If you are not able to do so *a small thing [like adding a single hour to your life]*, why do you worry about the rest?"⁴

"To be comforted by God does *not* mean we are removed from [hardships] but that we are given new ways of seeing God's presence right in the middle of [them]."⁵

What is important isn't *ONLY* what we see in our current tunnel vision. But often also what we are NOT focusing on.

When anxiety feeds and snakes in lies in our minds like torrential rain, when the old worries and fears are exacerbated with new stressors, how often does your focus shift to the background? to "the more subtle yet constant presence of God in your life?"⁶

⁴ Luke 12:22-26. NRSV. Emphasis added.

⁵ deVega 37. Emphasis added.

⁶ deVega 40.

In the book called *The Book of Joy*,
the Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminds us that a way to manage our worries is
“[to think] about others.

[We] can think about others who are in similar situation
or perhaps even worse situation,
but who have survived, even thrived.

It does help quite a lot to see [ourselves] as part of a greater whole.”⁷

The path of joy comes from connection and the path of sorrow comes from
separation

–because when we see others as part of us, as connected,
as interdependent,
then there is no challenge we cannot face–together.⁸

If we follow Jesus’ conclusion about being free from worry,
we see that he comes to the same end

–we find joy and peace even in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty
because we are connected

–not only to one another

but also to God.

⁷Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. 99.: Avery, 2016. Print.

⁸ Abrams, 99-100.

The “subtle yet constant presence of God” has always been running in the background.⁹

We just need to shift our focus to notice.

This connection snaps the hypotheticals,
the invisible rabbit trails,
the frenzied blurring,

back to the now

–to the center of where you are

–to the physicality of your body.

To the physicality of others’ bodies.

The connection running among all of us.

That God is still moving amongst us.

Look up at the ravens.

Consider the lilies.

Notice the daffodils.

A pause... a loosening... a centering...

⁹ deVega 40.

Our connection to God flows from the fact
that the character of our God the Father is to *give*.
God knows what we need and *gives* them to us.¹⁰

Jesus says that it *gives* God pleasure
to *give* God's children the Kingdom.¹¹

God is unfailing in generosity.

The conclusion of Jesus' teaching on being free from worry
is his call for his followers to sell their possessions and give alms.

It is a call for his followers to remove their self-infatuation and self-sufficiency.
To build their character after God.
and open their hands.

¹⁰ Luke 12:30.

¹¹ Luke 12:32.

To open *our* hands to receive God's abundance.

To open our hands to let go of the lives we have built on fear..

To loosen our grip so that we may find our real lives

–our lives as God's children

Sharing in and of God's abundance.

To live as vessels for God's generous and liberating works on this earth.

(Pause)

To let go of things that will fade away and seek after the true treasure

–which is Emmanuel, God with us.

Even in the uncertainty of today.

(Pause)

God being with us isn't contingent on our ability to see it.¹²

And how great a news is that:

God often operates just beyond our senses and our comprehension.¹³

Even in the uncertainty of today...

We dare to believe that God is still at work.¹⁴

We dare to let go of our lives of fear.

We dare to form ourselves after God's generosity.

For God is love,

and those who abide in love abide in God,

and God abides in them.¹⁵

And so, we can dare to live.

Thanks be to God.

¹² deVega 43.

¹³ deVega 43.

¹⁴ deVega 43.

¹⁵ 1 John 4:16b

Prayer of Intercession

A Prayer For Pandemic - By Cameron Wiggins Bellm

May we who are merely inconvenienced
remember those whose lives are at stake.

May we who have no risk factors
remember those most vulnerable.

May we who have luxury of working from home
remember those who must choose between
preserving their health
and making their rent.

May we who have the flexibility
to care for our children when their schools close
remember those who have no options.

May we who have to cancel our trips
remember those who have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money
in the tumult of the economic market
remember those who have no margin at all.

May we who settle in for a quarantine at home
remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country, let us choose love.

And during this time when we may not be able
to physically wrap our arms around each other,
let us yet find

ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors. **Amen.**