

The Reverend's Ruminations

Oh what a difference a month makes!?! Usually I'd be making that comment about the ever-changing Minnesota weather, yet despite enjoying some milder days in March, we all know it's not what I'm referring to this time around. A month has seen the exponential worldwide and national spread of COVID-19 and brought massive, unprecedented changes to our world—changes that most of us never could have imagined while scanning last month's church newsletter!

As I write this, we have just been informed of Governor Walz's "Shelter in Place" order that codifies specific restrictions which until now have been a broad collection of recommendations and suggestions. These may feel overly restrictive to some, but the truth of the matter is that IF we want to get back to "business as usual" anytime relatively soon, then we all need to take the order seriously and limit physical contact to slow the potential spread of the virus between individuals.

Such a change to our routine will make everything feel different, but people everywhere are learning that there are new and different ways to accomplish tasks and maintain connections in what may seem like an alternate reality. Children and teachers will soon be starting online learning utilizing a variety of technologies that wouldn't ordinarily be part of a classroom. Business and church meetings have similarly begun utilizing websites like *Zoom* to include multiple participants via audio and video conference calls. Worship services from nearly every denomination are suddenly streaming live on *Facebook* and being made available on various websites.

If there's one thing people (and maybe more specifically *church people*?) don't like, it's CHANGE. I've joked plenty of times that the six most dangerous words in the life of a congregation are, "we've always done it that way." But if changes were never implemented in the life of a church, then where would we be today? In case you don't remember UCC history, the *United Church of Christ* is a direct result of change. It only came into being in 1957 with the union of two Protestant denominations: the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches (each of which was, in turn, the result of a union of two earlier denominations). You can bet that before 1957, none of these churches had thought about changing the way they'd "always done it," but evolving regional and national demographics, as well as post-world war economies, made the union a logical choice that would ensure the continuation of Christ's mission in the world.

Fast forward to today, and it may feel as though that metaphorical fast forward button is stuck!?! Watching a church service online or participating in a video teleconference with a church board may feel like something out of a futuristic novel or sci-fi movie, but without such "newfangled" options church life could easily grind to a halt. In fact, I've been encouraged to see that even more people are (at least superficially) tuning in to our online services than would actually show up in the sanctuary on Sunday morning or Wednesday evening! We are continuing to record the service for broadcast on Thursday afternoons at 2:00 pm through Fairmont's cable access TV channel 12, so even though some options are new, others do remain the same.

Changes to our national pandemic response posture also seem to be coming out daily, if not hourly. To some, the continual volume of COVID-19 news—and worse, rumors—feels almost overwhelming. Such oversaturation can cause not only mental or physical stress, but spiritual distress as well. We may be monitoring our loved ones and ourselves for physical signs of the dreaded virus (as we must), but if you are in generally good health and are staying isolated to thwart person-to-person spread, then perhaps it's time to examine the mental and spiritual wellness of yourself and those around you.

As I recently encouraged during a "live Wednesday evening Lenten meditation" from my church office, please take time to reach out to one another—whether utilizing some of the new technologies or with

a good ol' fashioned phone call. A few volunteers from our congregation have begun touching base with everyone, so don't be surprised to get a phone call—maybe from an old friend, but maybe from a fellow church member that you barely know. Don't be shy! Human interaction is important to our mental well-being, so when we can't gather physically it becomes all too easy to isolate ourselves from ALL forms of interaction. Find new ways to engage with your children or grandchildren (or vice-versa, for you kids), whether just checking in with a quick call, reading a story online, playing an old board game with the kids, or learning a new craft from your mother.

Lent has also become an entirely different landscape this year, and Holy Week and Easter will undoubtedly be different than anything you've witnessed before. But that does not mean they are cancelled! Quite the contrary—even in an altered presentation, they may be one of the few “normal” touchpoints you get to experience in the coming weeks. If you're blessed with extra hours or days at home, now is the time to open your Bible and rediscover the narrative that culminates in the joy of Easter. I'd suggest reading a bit of John's gospel each day, perhaps starting in chapter 11 and continuing to reach Easter's glorious resurrection story in chapter 20. I plan to continue focusing my sermons on the epistle lessons within the Revised Common Lectionary, but those will obviously tie into the gospel lessons as we approach the holiest of Christian holidays on April 12.

As we move forward in ways both old and new, know that each of you is in my prayers. We will get through this together, and if we keep our minds and hearts open to new possibilities, we can emerge even stronger congregation than when we began!

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Cory Germain