

March 12, 2020 -- Grace Note

Dear family and friends of First Church Evanston,

It has been a strange week focused on one of the smallest and mysterious members of our planet: COVID-19. Its origin is still unknown and only a few weeks ago, we felt invincible as we glanced at the pandemic in China and the lockdown in Italy. When a few weeks ago we were among the first to offer a station with individual disposable communion cups; some thought it was overly cautious. Then came the



rude awakening that the virus had hitched a ride and undetected arrived on our shores. Apparently, there is a whole battalion in our midst already. My sole goal at the moment is to keep this congregation safe and connected to God.

My first resource has been CDC's guidelines for communities of faith. Secondly, I have also been consulting with clergy, staff, Church Council, NIC office, as well as with members of our congregation who work in the medical field and those who work in disaster preparedness. All experts urge temporarily suspending all face-to-face meetings in Sunday school, committees, bible studies etc.

Members of the congregation have emailed me and despite the tons of links you have sent, I am glad to report that responses have not been panicked or alarmist. Many of you have been concerned for those who are at risk by virtue of age or those whose health is compromised by underlying conditions. Some have expressed concern for those among us who live alone and will be further isolated without face-to-face interaction and touch. Some of you have expressed the desire to be in church during this stressful time, comparing the feeling as similar to what we experienced during 9/11. Most of you have urged that the church prevents the spread of the virus by taking whatever action is needed, including the cancellation of worship services. And there are those who have been most concerned for our church family members who are homeless as well as our Soup Kitchen family. In all this, I am guided by the Methodist mantra of "Do No Harm, Do Good, Stay in Love with God."

Do no harm! If we choose to gather together for services on Sunday morning, we

could very likely do harm to the most vulnerable among us. We could do harm by unknowingly spreading the virus as healthy carriers to other healthy carriers. It is true that we are already refraining from touching each other with handshakes, high fives and hugs; and we are maintaining a social distance of six feet; and are sanitizing our hands constantly. However, our tiny foe's presence remains sneaky and undetected. Therefore, to protect each other, we must seriously consider not gathering together face-to-face on Sunday morning.

The good news is that if we decide NOT to meet face-to-face on Sunday, we CAN still have corporate Worship and Christian Fellowship! As someone put it, "service is cancelled but church is on!"

Do not fret: we have the experience and practice of canceling services BUT NOT CHURCH! For instance, in the hot summer months we cancel service and leave our sanctuary which lacks air conditioning to retreat to the cool places of Lunt Park and Tittle Chapel. In that same way, it is possible to retreat into a Virtual Church with Virtual Worship! I hope everyone joins me in this new way of doing church! Tomorrow the techies among us will teach the pastors how to live stream worship as we prepare for virtual worship on Sunday, March 15, at 10:30 a.m.

On Sunday, with the congregation gathered in front of their laptops, cell phones and tablets, the pastors will preach, pray, and even lead a time for young disciples! We will find a way to ask you to register your presence and pass the virtual plate for the offertory plate! We are thinking of creative ways to "pass the peace of the Lord". Email if you think of a possibility! "It will be about God and it will be an hour long." I know some of you will dress up for the occasion and some of you will be in virtual church in your jammies!

Keep your eyes peeled for an email update tomorrow! There will be more than one way to access the worship service.

In the meanwhile, I solicit your prayers for all saying:

O God who calls us to the Lenten pilgrimage, Good Friday has arrived early with its arsenals of fear and anxiety. You who does not slumber nor sleep, you know the source of the something strange that is going on in your world. Confound the minds of those who engineer evil and unleash terror on your creation. Quicken your partners in research and cure for all your children. Remind us again of Easter's song that "goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; hate is stronger than darkness; and life is stronger than death." Amen.

In Christ's love,

Pastor Grace

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