

Judica 21 March 2021 "Faith over Fear"

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Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Well dear Church, we have now hit the one year anniversary of "2 weeks to flatten the curve". So this morning I want to take a look back over what we have done in the last year; where we have failed; where we could do better in case something like this happens again; and hopefully we can learn and grow together.

In December of 2019, COVID was detected in all 50 states. On March 13th, President Trump declared a national emergency, and then that Sunday following March 15th, the only difference we had here at Church, was that I concluded the sermon that "we should trust God and wash your hands". Pastor Bischoff and I also went back and washed our hands right before the distribution of the Lord's Supper. Now don't think that we don't normally wash our hands before Church, we certainly do, we just don't typically do it then.

Later that day, Governor Evers issued a mandate announcing that churches could only have 50 people worshipping together at a time. Then on Monday, the next day, March 16th, I spent 3 hours with the other Missouri Synod pastors in our area to discuss how we would do Church for 50 people at a time. We spent another 3 hours that night with our Board of Elders discussing how to do Church with 50 people at a time - in total I spent 6 hours that Monday to talk about how to do something I would never actually get to do.

Because the very next day, March 17th, Governor Evers issued a "safer at home" order, declaring that churches could only worship with fewer than 10 at a time. That would be a part of the "2 weeks to flatten the curve", a curve which was never designed to eradicate COVID, it was designed to help our health care workers and hospitals from being overrun with COVID patients. And thanks be to God for faithful doctors and nurses who worked tirelessly.

What were we going to do? We had spent 6 hours discussing how to do church with 50, and now we were being told we couldn't have even 10. Panic ensued not just among our leadership but in the world. It felt like the world had gone insane. And so, we decided as a knee jerk reaction that we couldn't hold in person services. That next day I started doing live devotions everyday through Facebook, to give you God's Word everyday, and then I put those on the church's website. Pastor Bischoff recorded a service on the Saturday prior to Sunday March 22nd, so that you might follow along from your homes. And on that day I sat and I watched the same video that you did, and I communed my wife and myself, saying the Words of Institution over the bread and wine, but because I'm a pastor and she is a part of my flock, I can do that.

And then I looked at her and said "I can never do this again". I cannot sit at home and watch church, it is not the same. So many people were not able to do what I was able to do as a pastor. You can not commune through a screen; that doesn't work. And so I said to her, I can't do this again. I talked to many of my friends and I prayed fervently. And I said, "Lord, what can I do here?" And I was reminded of my ordination vows; that I had sworn to uphold God's Word, that I had sworn to feed God's children, not just when it was safe to do so, not just when we didn't have any fear of death or disease, but at ALL times.

And that was a struggle for me. Because I had been told by multiple people that my wife, who was over 8 months pregnant at that time, and my yet to be born child were just as capable of dying from this virus as our elderly. And yet I put my life, my wife, and my children in God's hands and I said "Lord, please don't take these people from me. Nevertheless not my will, but thine be done; for I know Lord, that if I were to die, if my wife were to die, or any of my children, they would be with You. Faith in You saves them eternally."

And so I set out to feed the children that God had given me through this church. I set out to find a way to do church for 9 people at a time. And it was crazy: I printed out orders of service to follow each week, I made sure that we went every other pew 1st and 3rd and then the next service was 2nd and 4th, I wiped everything down, I washed all of the altar guild equipment, I was the usher, I rang the bells, I

sanitized my hands until they were bleeding. I had 60 services from March to May, to try to obey what the governor had set before the churches.

And as I was sitting home that Sunday, and realizing that Gamestop had declared itself essential, that you could go and purchase a video game but you could not go to your Church to hear God's word proclaimed and to receive the sacrament. That abortion clinics were open and that you could still go and buy drugs, I said, "This isn't going to work. Lord, my life is in your hands, protect me and those I love, but help me to do my job". Wal-mart, Menards, the liquor store, all of them stayed open. If this truly was as bad as they thought this was going to be, all of it should've closed. So the next day we started having services of 9, for 2 months. On Easter we had 11 services here that day, and yet I still had to turn people away, and for that, for every week that I told you you had to wait because I was full, I am sorry. I shouldn't have done that, please forgive me.

I called everyone to make sure that they were okay, that they had everything that they needed and to encourage them to come to the same house of the Lord that they had come to year after year. I believed that the government was trying to help and so we tried to obey the 4th commandment: to respect authority, as they appear to be focused on the 5th - to help the neighbor in his body. And yet, the first table of the law does not get pushed to the side when it's not safe. We are still commanded to "fear, love, and trust in God above all things." (SC I) We are still commanded to worship every single Lord's Day. Those commandments come first.

We had a decision to make: should we sanitize everything, should we sing, how would we do Communion. All of those questions were things that we had to labor over and I spent hour after hour after hour on the phone with multiple pastors to see what we could do.

We chose to sing, even though there were some Churches who chose not to. We chose to sing because God commands it. God says sing my praises - he gave us 150 psalms, a whole book of songs to sing, along with other songs recorded in the scriptures.

We changed Communion wine, for multiple reasons: A) we were trying to find a way to make it safer. The wine that we had used was only 51% Concord grape wine, and B) it was made by a Jewish manufacturer, and it wasn't even Kosher for Passover which is why we had it in the first place And so we switched to a Christian company, one who made this wine specifically for the Sacrament.

We bought a new chalice, because the chalice that we have now is made of precious metal on the inside. The alcohol in the wine mixed with the precious metal, wiping with the purificator, the CDC has written that there appears to be no additional risk over against the individual cups. Also, it is the blood of Christ and used according to Christ's institution, which is why I'm the last to drink, and I drink everything that's left.

We decided to continue to kneel as we had, to kneel together, even though separated a bit, we would wipe it, we would sanitize it, we would do all those things, but we had to continue. The chalice must be offered as it had been for 2000 years. There have been diseases much worse than this. Throughout history, there has been the Black Plague, the Spanish Flu, Polio, Typhus, Typhoid Fever, Ebola, all of these things have come before us, most of them even more lethal than COVID. And yet the Church did not close, the Church did not stop.

On Tuesday, March 24th, that "safer at home" order was extended to April 24th. 2 weeks had now been turned into over a month and then it was extended again to May 24th. 2 weeks had now been turned into 2 months. What's the next step to take? We could lament at what the Governor had chosen to do; that all of these places could have 25% of their occupancy but yet Churches could only have 9. And what I did is I chose to write our Governor; I wrote the Governor, I reached out to our state representatives to let them know that this could not continue. That Church was an essential aspect of people's lives, and in the face of even possible death, the Church needed to gather to hear God's Word of encouragement and to receive His Sacraments. I contacted the village, I contacted the fire department and the police department to make sure that when we chose to open further, they would not crack down on us. And then I saw that the Milwaukee Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church. that chose to close all of her Churches for two months, had chosen now, at Pentecost in May 2020, they would open up to 25%. I contacted St. Thomas Aquinas here in town and spoke with their leadership-helpful and friendly leadership-and I decided if they can do it, why can't we? We are just as essential. We have the life-giving body and blood of Jesus that

needed to be given. I also spoke to the pastor at Living Waters (WELS)-helpful and friendly guy-about a plan forward in Waterford.

And so our leadership talked again. And we discussed how we would do 25% of occupancy. And when the Supreme Court struck that down, we rejoiced. We said Lord, we will continue to put our lives in your hands, we will be cautious, we will be concerned for the neighbor, but we will also meet. We did the sign-ups, we did the sanitizing, we continued to make you sit away from people that you love, people that have been a part of your family for decades, trying to follow orders.

Then on May 13th, the State Supreme Court struck down Governor Evers' mandate. And so we met and decided we would no longer have to wait until May 31st to do 25%, we would start a week earlier. We were no longer under compulsion by the government to do so, and so we did that. And then things continued to spiral. On May 25th, riots broke out in the streets, a police precinct was burned, lives and businesses destroyed, and yet it seemed that the government condoned it. They even seemed to encourage it; and yet they still told you couldn't be with your grandparents or your great grandchildren. That is what we endured. That is what we have done.

Four months after the beginning of that, Governor Evers issued a new mandate, a mask mandate. And the pastors meet again. We declared that it was an illegitimate order, that he had no right to do so, that we were no longer in a perpetual state of emergency - he had 60 days to do that. And so we also decided that we would not enforce this mandate. We would tell people if you want to wear a mask, please do so, but do not judge those who don't. And if you choose not to, please do so, but do not judge those who do. We had been told by scientists that masks didn't work that way prior to this. What were we supposed to do with the new science? But ultimately, it wasn't about that. It was about the fact that your face has been made in the image of God, and even if you don't always like what you see in the mirror, God loves it. He created you. He loves your smile, and I love it too. And so we also decided that we would not enforce this mandate. We would tell people if you want to wear a mask, please do so, but do not judge those who don't. And if you choose not to, please do so, but do not judge those who do. We chose to see your faces, that our faces would shine as we announced to you the blessings of the Lord, that His face shines on you.

What happened next? Every 2 months a new state of emergency issued. Time and time again until it was finally voted down in February of 2021, just to be reissued again. I held mask services for 6 months, for those who said they would only come if masks were required on everyone. I met with people outside of their homes, I offered private communion both in Church and at homes for months - I still offer that option. I have no doubt that this virus is real. I have no doubt that this virus can be lethal, especially if it's mixed with other health issues. I have no doubt that it did play a hand in Glenn and Pastor's deaths. But I also know that neither of those Godly men would have died a day later had they not had COVID. God authored their lives and He set their days. (Job 14:5)

We had originally been told that 10% of the population would die from COVID-19. And in the state of Wisconsin we now have the numbers that show that 1% of all people who tested positive with COVID have died with COVID. Instead of thanking God that this isn't as bad as we thought it would be, we doubled down on our fear. We locked ourselves away.

Why must we continue to worship? Why must we continue to gather in the face of uncertainty, in the face of possible death? Because God has commanded it. Because He blesses us through our time together. Real worship and fellowship is done in person. You cannot actually worship through a screen. Your mind is easily distracted. I know that sometimes, especially when the sermon goes long, it's a little bit distracting in here too, but you cannot get up and go make a pot of coffee; or hear the sound of slippers at church; at least you shouldn't.

We must gather. We must receive Christ's gifts. You cannot commune through a screen. You must be here to receive it. That the pastor's hand that He has called to distribute would distribute it to you. The Church throughout 2000 years has never stopped, even in the face of viruses, disease, persecution, possible death, and certain death.

At 92 years old, Lucille came here week after week this summer and eventually it was cancer that took her life. How many other people have we expended because of our concern over COVID-19? How many people have been lost to loneliness and depression? How many children have struggled starving for

education in the last year? Or been abused? Do we care about those that suffer from depression? On November 20th, hours after I got the phone call that Pat had died from cancer, I got a phone call from my father that my sister had died. The next week, as I was preparing to go up to her memorial service, Dorothy's daughter stopped over to let me know that her mother had died as well. None of those had COVID.

People had been separated from each other. Lives that you don't know when God chooses to end, ended without you being present. Nursing homes had been closed for a year, husbands not able to be with their wives, pastors not able to give the life giving Sacrament, for a year we've done this. God's time matters. Do we not trust Him? Do we not know that "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain"? (Philippians 1:21). What's the worst that can happen in death as a Christian? That's life with Jesus. Is that really so bad?

It has now been over a year, should we not run to Church, should we not run to the Sacrament? The apathetic days must be done for you dear Church; the days where you thought that Church was only a priority when you felt like it. When you were more tired on Sunday morning, when you had other obligations like sports or whatever it might be, all of that must end. Some of you were starved for the sacrament, the days are done. We need to be stronger through this. We need to gather. It is the most important thing you can do as a Christian, to gather in His Church, your Father's house, and receive His gifts. I need you to ask yourself, "If not now, when will it be deemed "safe enough" to come back to church? Will it ever? What does God want me to do? Does His Word say to stay away from His Church and His Sacrament when it could mean death?"

Should we do that only when it's safe or should we put our lives in His hands and say "Lord, if you choose that it might be the hour, let it be". No amount of anxiety or worry can add a single hour to your span. (Matthew 6:27) I know not every decision that we've made makes you happy. But it's what we felt was necessary at the time, and where we go from here is really up to you. Will you devote your lives entirely to God? Will you find yourself here each and every week to hear His word and receive His gifts?

I thank God for our secretaries who spent extra time putting those services together with me week after week. I thank God for our Board of Elders who stood by me and helped me make decisions that weren't easy for us to make. I thank God for you here today and every week, for your faithfulness to Him, that you have chosen to be here, even though you still can't turn on the TV without hearing you shouldn't.

I thank God for my wife. I failed as a husband and father after my son was born on April 29th. I devoted all of my time to being sure that I could give you the gifts that God had called me to give. And I remember calling my mother in law in tears begging her to come down because I knew I couldn't do it. God forgive me, as she has. I thank God for a wife who devoted herself to Him, to me, to our children, through thick and thin, in sickness and in health. I thank God for parents and a family that cares enough to make sure that my children are cared for. I thank God for brothers in the ministry that at times carried me through this. I thank God for a Church family who cares enough to gather and be in the Lord's house.

I know it's not easy, and yet we have to do it. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ is what we are called to do. Jesus said in our Gospel lesson, "Most assuredly I say to you if anyone keeps My Word, he shall never see death" (John 8:51). We are going to die, unless Christ returns, but we won't die eternally. For faith in Jesus Christ means that you will live forever. Body and soul united for eternity around the throne of the Lamb in His kingdom which shall have no end.

So don't have fear, let your faith be stronger than your fear, let it overcome your fear. Trust in the Jesus who went to the cross for you. Trust in the Jesus who at His appointed time, suffered arrest, suffered being beaten, suffered nails piercing His hands and His feet, a crown of thorns in His head, a spear in His side, that He might die to give us life. Trust Him, no matter what happens in this life. Trust Him.

The Church sings: "Whatever of earthly good this life may grant me, I'll risk for Thee; no shame, no cross, shall daunt me. I shall not fear what foes can do to harm me, nor death alarm me" (O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken stanza 13). Amen.

The peace of God that passeth all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.