QUARANTINE

Pentecost, 2020

"When the Day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all (still) together in one place." Acts 2:1-21

I am constantly amazed at how timely the lectionary seems to be. I mean, here we are 7 weeks after Easter, still quarantined, still staying home, still gathering in our own Upper Rooms – waiting for the Holy Spirit to release us from our fears of what lie ahead, still worried about what the politicians are going to do next, still afraid we're going to run into trouble if we open the door. And not without good reason. We don't know what will happen next. We don't know if the threat is nearly over. We don't exactly know if it's safe to go outside even with a face covering. So the disciples are in the same stuck place that we find ourselves. Only they didn't have the internet. They didn't have Walmart or Amazon to send in provisions. I imagine Mary Magdelene was doing most of the shopping.

Meanwhile, others had broken the curfew. Jews from all over the world were gathering in Jerusalem to celebrate the 4th of July – or maybe it was the Feast of Weeks – I guess that was it. They flew in on Jet Blue despite the quarantine, and now you had people from New York and Florida and the Carolinas running loose in the streets! Thank goodness we have The Book of Acts to tell us how we should deal with such problems….

Unfortunately, this is a story about God and humanity, and so the answers we seek are sometimes hard to decipher. One group of Christians will read this story from Acts today and decide it means we should boldly throw opens the doors, start preaching, walk out into the street, and demand our constitutional rights to

religious freedom and peaceful gatherings. But down the street at another church some Christians will read the same story and decide that the disciples were right to shut the doors and quarantine another six months. They will decide that the thoughtful, prayerful deliberations in the Upper Room are exactly what we need today. Since nobody knows exactly how the coronavirus works, and we don't have a cure yet, they may believe that in order to serve the most vulnerable among us we should keep to ourselves in the meantime.

Darn. And I thought we had the answer. Maybe, as it turns out, there is no one answer. Maybe there is not even one right answer. Maybe God and our circumstances suggest that there are different answers depending on where you are living: Maybe there is one best solution for New York City and another for Maine. Maybe there is one answer where the virus is still very active, and another where the virus seems to be on the decline. And you can be sure that whatever decision is made either by us or by our representatives, there will be plenty of argument – mostly along party lines.

A few days ago a friend of ours went to get a few things at Walmart in Ellsworth. She decided that, out of concern for others, she would wear a face-covering while shopping. Not everyone was covered as she was, and when she got in line at the cash register people started jeering at her, saying things like, "Hey, what are you afraid of? Afraid I'll give you the virus? Hey, what happened to your face? Got a skin disease?" She tried too explain that the face-covering wasn't to protect herself but to protect others from her own coughs and sneezes. But they weren't interested in what was true. They were only interested in shaming. It's a too-

prevalent pastime in our current society. Everywhere we go, whatever we do there seem to be people ready to take offense.

So what does any of this have to do with Pentecost? Well, I'm glad you asked. As it turns out, Peter and the other disciples had not gotten drunk at 9 o'clock in the morning as some thought. They had discovered, in their seven weeks of quarantine that God speaks to anyone who will listen. They were reminded that what their crucified Master had done above all was to respect the dignity of anyone who sought God's purpose and call. Jesus himself was ridiculed for taking the needs of others to heart. He was attacked for preaching a Gospel of all-encompassing love. He spoke a language that was available to anyone who had "ears to hear." And this is the one through whom God intends to rescue the world. We will defeat the coronavirus not by shaming, but by being concerned for those throughout the world who have become ill. We will defeat the virus by being careful of the most vulnerable among us. We will defeat the fears of becoming ill by putting our trust in God – the same God who raises up those who fall, who still offers a resurrected life to the thousands who have died.

In this country the question is being asked, "Is church an essential industry?" Should the doors of the church be opened? They are different questions. The answer to the first question is a resounding "YES!" The church is an essential industry. We need the witness of good people who can listen to different voices and engage in conversation, who can offer love and assistance to those in need. The second question is more difficult. We have proven that the church will survive the quarantine – perhaps become even stronger. We are finding new ways to share the Spirit and new ways to minister our communities. Our circumstances in

this country and around the world vary, and so we wait for the time to be right when the doors will again swing wide and invite us into closer contact. In the meantime, we will be followers of Christ who will support one another, and most especially those most at risk. As a friend emailed us this morning: The churches may be empty, but so is the tomb!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.