

From the Associate Pastor

Why We Aren't Worshipping in Person (Again)

There are many good reasons to gather together for worship, even in the midst of a pandemic. Communal worship is a gift that God gave us. We know we need human interaction, especially in a time when so many people are dealing with extra loneliness or mental health issues. We know that being part of a wider faith community helps us all to grow in faith in ways we couldn't on our own. And there's just something about singing and reading *together* that can never be replaced. At St. Andrew we have many people filling a variety of leadership roles, and every single one of us is committed to worshipping together in person again.

So why aren't we worshipping in person?

Towards the end of November, the Council, and the COVID-19 Advisory Committee (CAC) had a long conversation. By the end of that conversation, the Council decided to allow a small group including the CAC, a few council leaders, and key staff members to decide on a weekly basis whether or not we would offer in-person worship services. This, we hope, will give us the most flexibility to worship in person safely as soon as we can.

OK – so why aren't we worshipping in person?

Well, you know the data-based reasons. The number of active COVID-19 cases is soaring nationwide, including here in Williamson County, where we are seeing our highest numbers all year. And while, yes, it is up to each individual to decide what kind of risks they are willing to take for themselves, we also cannot deny that our own decisions impact others. More positive cases means a higher risk of infection for everyone – including folks who are trying to take as few risks as possible because of an underlying condition. (Dr. Amy Vehec had heartbreaking stories to share with us.) And perhaps most importantly, many of our local hospitals are nearing the capacity of patients they can treat – not only for COVID-19, but also for accidents, surgeries, and other illnesses. (And I personally think that if we are going to spend 8 months celebrating doctors and nurses as our heroes, we should also listen to them when they ask us to help them by not meeting in large groups.) Our entire community's health and safety net is weakened when we as individuals choose to take more risks.

To put all this in Christian language: we are called to love our neighbor. This often means prioritizing our neighbors who are most vulnerable: our neighbor who is more at-risk than we are; our neighbor who is in the medical field, working to fight off this disease. Furthermore, the Bible teaches us that the most sacred law God gave us is to preserve life. The best way to preserve life and love our neighbor is to *not* create an opportunity for a large group to gather – at least for now.

We are committed to worshipping in person – when it is both safe and responsible to do so.

This means that, in the meantime, we are going to learn to get better at growing our faith from home. We'd all rather be together in our usual pews. But since we can't, we will focus on all the things we can do. We can develop daily and weekly practices that work for us and our family, from dinner table prayers and walks outside to virtual worship or a Bible reading plan. We can join one of St. Andrew's many small group offerings or special events – because talking together is more important than Zoom fatigue. Our faith will actually be made stronger by this challenge and by the extra care it requires of us.

St. Andrew will continue to offer support for at-home faith formation on our new webpage, www.saintandrewchurch.com/faith-formation. For the season of Advent, we are hoping the

whole community will join together in making Advent wreaths and using them as part of our at-home devotional practices. Stay tuned for more details.

We may all have different opinions on the best ways to live in these times, but none of us is happy with the current situation. So, let's be kind to one another. Pray for one another. Call one another. Send silly cards in the old-fashioned mail. These are terrible times – but we get to choose whether we work to make them better for ourselves and for others.

Grace and peace to you,

Pastor Katherine