

1

Eight weeks. Can you believe it? That's how long we've been apart from one another. I've been so focused on the coronavirus the past few months that I've begun to lose track of time. Sometimes I even forget what day it is, for time has seemed to move in a different way as I strive to create new patterns in my day. Have you experienced that?

I've tried to remind myself that we may be physically distanced from one another, but that doesn't mean we're socially distanced. I talk more on the phone, see you in Zoom groups, and send more notes. I enjoy hearing from many of you, though I miss seeing you each week gathered in our sanctuaries.

When the Governor recently released his plan to gradually reopening the state over the next few months, churches were given permission to begin gathering in their sanctuaries this Sunday. As I met with the Elders from our congregations on Zoom last weekend, I wondered if we could come to a consensus about the matter. *What if some are ready to come to our sanctuaries and others are*

not, I wondered. How will we keep everyone in agreement?

As the conversations unfolded, I was amazed to discover we had complete consensus with both groups—it's too soon to reopen, everyone suggested. Due to the risk factors of the members of our congregations and the complexity of keeping everyone safe, all agreed we will remain at a distance through the end of May, and then we will reevaluate. I was reminded, however, that our churches are not *closed*, we are just doing church in a different way. With our improved lighting, faster internet, and a new camera, you may notice a change. Plus isn't it nice to get out of bed on Sunday morning and come to church in your PJs?

I'm grateful that our two congregations can reach such agreement. I know that some churches, and we humans in general, are known to have conflicts. I imagine each one of you can point to a time when you wondered to yourself, *Are we in agreement, or not?*

2

Even in the early days of the church's birth, conflict seemed to fill the air, as we noticed in Paul's visit to the church in Corinth and in the letter he wrote to the Corinthians. The city had been through many wars over the years and had even been destroyed several hundred years before Paul's time. After it's rebuilding, the city became remarkably diverse, made up of Romans, Greeks, Jews, and the newly forming community of those who followed Jesus. This diversity created difficulties, with some arguing over which leader to follow in the church. When Paul visited the city, he found hospitality and a place to stay with the couple Aquila and Priscilla, for they were all tentmakers and shared a common career.

As was Paul's custom, he went to the place of worship each Sabbath, but did you notice how the Book of Acts described the scene? We're told he would argue and try to convince everyone of his beliefs. Can you imagine what it would be like if every time we gathered you would argue with me?

Later, when he wrote to the Corinthian church, he said, "I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends, using the authority of Jesus, our Master. I'll put it as urgently as I can: You must get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another, cultivating a life in common."¹

On the one hand, Paul liked to argue about his beliefs, but on the other hand, for the long-term health of the congregation, he urged them to get along with one another

I think that's still good advice, isn't it? To get along? To try and find agreement? I think it's especially important during this time when we face the coronavirus, for it's made us realize we're all facing this problem together, though not all agree on how soon we should begin our normal routines again. My daughter reposted on Facebook this week something that I think the apostle Paul might have written to us today if he were alive:

As governors are trying to figure out how to ease back in to a new normal, please remember:

3

-  Some people don't agree with the state opening.... that's okay. Be kind.
-  Some people are still planning to stay home.... that's okay. Be kind.
-  Some are still scared of getting the virus and a second wave happening....that's okay. Be kind.
-  Some are sighing with relief to go back to work knowing they may not lose their business or their homes....that's okay. Be kind.
-  Some are thankful they can finally have a surgery they have put off....that's okay. Be kind.
-  Some will be able to attend interviews after weeks without a job....that's okay. Be kind.
-  Some will wear masks for weeks....that's okay. Be kind.
-  Some people will rush out to get the hair or nails done.... that's okay. Be kind.
-  The point is, everyone has different viewpoints/feelings and that's okay. Be kind.

Would it be amazing if this “be kind” idea spread throughout the world? What if our judgment of others ended? What if fighting and arguing stopped? This idea seemed to be happening at the end of March when the “secretary-general of the United Nations issued a call for a global ceasefire. ‘The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war,’ he declared.” Pope Francis and many others also echoed this plea “to secure a respite for those countries and regions so weakened by violence and

conflict that they would be especially vulnerable to the pandemic. To general surprise, many armed groups around the world appeared to be listening.”²

Wouldn't that be amazing if this virus led to the end of war? If we could recognize our common humanity and get along, as Paul suggested to the Corinthian Church 2000 years ago? By early April, a dozen or so countries laid down their weapons and dialogue seemed to begin, and many began to ask, “Are we in agreement?” The calm lasted a short time before groups were back to fighting. It seems that Paul's advice to get along is more difficult than fighting one another.

I know that this virus has created stress in our lives, for some parents have lost jobs, some children are afraid to go outside and play, some worry about having enough food or other supplies, and some are just tired of being cooped up inside their home. Spouses may begin to lash out at one another, friends may complain about their lives, and anxiety seems to grow around us like tangled weeds.

④

It's during this time that Paul's words to the church in Corinth seem so helpful for us today as he wrote to them and to us:

Just think—you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you... And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master

Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.³

Remarkable words for today, aren't they? Are we in agreement? God's gifts are right in front of you. God will never give up on you.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:10, *The Message Bible*

² "How covid-19 gave peace a chance, and nobody took it," May 5, 2020, www.economist.com/international/2020/05/05/how-covid-19-gave-peace-a-chance-and-nobody-took-it

³ 1 Corinthians 1:7-9, *The Message Bible*.