

PASTOR'S NOTES.

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.

Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection.”

2 Corinthians 13:5-9 (NIV)

On the first Sunday of the New Year, our worship service will focus on renewing our Covenant with God. This service has been part of the Methodist tradition since 1755, and it seems timely given our circumstances of the past several months.

This year has taught us that there are a number of things in our daily lives that we can manage without, at least for a time. As a church we have had to forego the potluck or fundraising dinner, the fellowship coffee hour, the extended Sunday School class, the passing of the offering plate, hymnals, hugs and handshakes, singing as a group, and occasionally not even meeting in the church building.

As we look to next year, we can expect some of this to change; we will at times have to suspend in-person services, most likely when there are not enough people well enough to manage the necessary safety steps. But we also can expect that there will come a time, either through a large number getting through the virus, or a number being vaccinated, that the risks will decrease to the point where we can pick some of what we have given up. So it seems good to consider this now.

I remind you that in its beginning, as we find it in Acts 2:41-47, the church was impacting people most in the time **between** services: in learning together, eating together, praying together, verse 47 says *“the Lord added to their number **daily** those who were being saved.”* So while worship services are important, it was more often the daily interactions where life change was happening. With this in mind, I suggest that the primary work of the church revolves around those meetings dedicated to fellowship, learning, and prayer. This is what has maintained Maple Street over the years, as well as most of the other churches with whom I have worked. Of secondary importance are the worship services; they are tremendously valuable to current Christians, but for the typical outsider they mean little until after that person has become involved in the primary meetings. That appears to me to be true both in the first century and in 2021.

Our prayer meetings, fellowship gatherings, and learning groups have taken a huge hit these past several months. Some of the groups in the church have continued with online meetings, and some have made due with phone calls to check in. These are important steps, but I suspect that all of us feel this is far less than the contact we would like, and it is even harder to invite new people.

Indeed, the biggest casualty in the semi-lockdown of the past several months is the evangelism of our church and many of our sister churches. I have heard all through my growing years that the church is the one institution created for the people who are NOT in it. So how do we “recover” this focus in the year to come?

I suspect that recognizing the importance of our primary meetings is a first step. We have a need for more and deeper connections with others, and we need to find ways to expand the circle of people with whom we connect. We can follow the directions of the scripture above- to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. Is our faith growing at this time in our lives, or have we put it on hold like so many other things this past year? In what ways can we continue and expand our meeting together – to pray, to learn, to grow in love for each other? I will add this into my daily prayers, encourage you likewise.

Paul makes this challenge to the Corinthians because, in his own words, “our prayer is for your perfection” (verse 9). So, as this is Paul’s prayer for them, so this is my prayer for you, and, I pray, this will be your prayer for those God has placed in your care.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.