

PASTOR'S NOTES. The Differential Challenge.

*“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

Hebrews 10:23-25 (NRSV)

As I am writing this, we are at a point in our COVID-19 timeline where overall cases are in decline. (The official graph for Ohio is at <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/covid-19/dashboards>.) That is, while new cases are occurring daily, the rate is slowing, which suggests that our hospitals will be able to manage the patients who arrive. However, this does not mean that cases will continue to decline, and there is still the possibility that most of us will contract the virus within the new few years.

We are at a different point now than back in 2020, when nearly everyone was at risk of infection. In theory, all of us are at risk, but our risk varies. Some persons have had COVID-19 (knowingly), most adults in Ohio have been vaccinated (66.48% as of this writing) and many are now getting a vaccine booster. Many are too young for a vaccine, and many are advised to forego a vaccine because of other health issues. In addition, many who might appear to be at low risk are caring for persons at high risk.

At the church we have seen the return of slightly more than half of the congregation to worship services on a regular basis. While it is encouraging to see each other again whenever we meet, we are reminded that there are many others who are not with us. This is in part because some are less safe indoors in public, some have invested their time elsewhere, and some have become used to spending time at home.

At Maple Street we've seen the effect of this in groups that are just beginning to meet again. We also see it at the Free Store and Community Kitchen. Before, the people who came to us represented many walks of life, and there were many that came as much for the social interaction as for the services we provided. Now we see a smaller group of people who are more likely coming because they need the services.

I suspect that most of us have seen our social circles shrink during the last couple of years. After all, our social circles tend to shrink as we get older under normal circumstances, and the pandemic has accelerated this. For a while now, it has become normal to spend less time meeting with others.

And yet, the job of the church is to meet *more* with others, as the passage from Hebrews above reminds us. In my first message at Maple Street, I said that the key to the church (anywhere) is what happens “between services.” In Acts chapter 2 we are told that after Peter told the people about Jesus, the community that formed tried to spend as much time together as possible, even daily when they could:

*“So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the*

*breaking of bread and the prayers... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."*

Acts 2:41-42, 44-47 (NRSV)

So, as I see it, the challenge for us is how we bring each other together more, especially those who are isolated, and the many who are not part of any Christian community. Wherever the church has grown, there have been many Christians coming together for study, prayer, and fellowship. When we are living largely alone, we feel the angst of loneliness, but we don't often recognize that a small group of supportive people in Christ is what we truly need. Our greatest need for today may well be those people who have the vision and desire to invite people into groups for study, prayer, and fellowship.

There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to this. Many persons still are not safe in groups, and their concerns must be respected. For some, phone calls or outdoor meetings may still be only way to connect. Still, this is a way to remind others that they are important to us. And like the early church, some of us can connect with others daily, while for others just making a little more time in a week will take work.

We must ask ourselves if we are "neglecting to meet together." Are you being invited to meet and not responding? And if you are not being invited, are you inviting others (just a few) to meet with you? We don't need to wait for others to do this. And even if it means just a couple times a week, we are still expanding the work of the church. Whenever you are coming together for study, prayer, or fellowship, you *are* the church:

*"For where two or three are gathered in My name, I (Jesus) am there among them."*

Matthew 18:20 (NRSV)

My challenge to all of us (including me) is to expand the ways we meet together with others. Even small steps will make a difference. Maybe just a couple times each week, but every bit grows the church of Jesus Christ. And I believe you won't be sorry.

Yours in Christ,

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