

Dear Saints,

Since January, the over-arching theme in worship has been “Returning to Jesus” and the primary focus has been Mark’s Gospel. Week by week, we have considered what it means to be disciples of Jesus who are called to walk in the Kingdom Way of God’s mercy, grace, love, and peace.

While listening to Mark 6:30-45, the feeding of the five thousand, we considered what it means to confess that compassion is at the heart of who our God is for this compassion is revealed in and through Jesus. As our Shepherd, it is Jesus who leads us in the way of the compassionate kingdom. While listening to Mark 5:1-20, when Jesus encountered “Legion,” we considered the ways we are possessed in our own culture by various things that swirl around us. And I affirmed at that time the great biblical witness that through it all, God is with us.

Today, we are facing a new “Legion” that is a resurgence of the old. The Delta variant of Covid-19 is presenting a challenge to many of us who have done our duty as Christians and as citizens. We’ve worn our masks, we remained physically and socially distanced from one another for a long time, and we were vaccinated whenever it was available to us. You may feel as I do, that the recent news of this resurgence is frustrating. And with the amount of information/misinformation swirling in the world around us, it can be difficult to know what voices to listen to and trust.

Here is what we know thus far about the Delta variant:

- This is a mutation of the original Covid-19 virus.
- It is more contagious than the original.
- Vaccinations are effective against serious infections—most may not even develop symptoms, but recent research has shown that even vaccinated individuals who are infected can shed the virus.
- Those who are unvaccinated have a very high risk for serious infections.
- There is substantial community transmission in most counties in Western PA, including Washington and Allegheny counties.
- The CDC is recommending that all people in areas of substantial transmission, including those who are fully vaccinated, resume wearing masks in public, indoor settings.
- You can read a succinct and researched article here:
<https://www.sciencenews.org/article/delta-variant-studies-cdc-coronavirus-covid-pandemic>

Beloved, we have shown great love for one another and resilience. It has been a tremendous blessing to be your pastor and to walk in this space of unity, clarity, and humility with you. And we are at a place where we are all being called upon once again to remember our vocation as disciples of Jesus, our calling to the Kingdom Way, and have compassion for one another as well as for those we may not know.

Because we love one another, because we follow Jesus, because we have trusted the wisdom of those who study viruses, our Session is requesting that all those who attend in-person worship resume wearing a mask beginning this Sunday (August 8th) and, as much as possible, spread out throughout the

sanctuary. We will continue wearing masks in worship for the foreseeable future knowing that it will not be forever. It goes without saying: I agree with this decision unequivocally. It is a minor inconvenience when considering the alternative.

The psalmist reminds us to “Hope in the Lord. For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him there is great power to redeem (Psalm 130:7).” The Lord will lead us through this time; and may we continue to embody the compassion of Jesus with one another as well as with those whom we encounter. May we continue to uphold the values we hear in Ephesians 4:1-17—the values of unity, clarity, and humility—in our life together.

And please, encourage anyone you know to get vaccinated—the sooner the better.

Live Big, Love Well!

~Tom