13 March 2020

Dear NRPC Friends,

I don’t know if any or many of you grew up learning the Westminster Catechism. The first question from that Q&A teaching tool goes something like this: “What is the chief and highest end of humanity?” I remember the answer as “to worship and enjoy God forever!” Today I checked my Book of Confessions and I learned that the answer actually reads, “to *glorify* God and fully to enjoy God forever.” This difference was reassuring to me.

You probably are wondering why I would say that. It is because **the Session has voted to pause all in-person church gatherings – including worship – until we sense that the COVID-19 crisis has at least begun to resolve**. I have struggled with this, asking myself, “How can we set aside worship, our primary reason for being!?”

I sense we are in a season when *glorifying* God might mean pausing our in-person *worship* for a while. Several Elders have researched the science of COVID-19 quite extensively. We are learning that people who may not know they are infected can rather easily transmit the disease to their neighbors, whether or not there is actual contact between neighbors. No doubt you’ve already heard news that people 65 and up as well as those with a compromised immune system are at greater risk than the general population. The beauty of Sunday worship – that young and old, healthy and vulnerable gather for one purpose every week – becomes a pretty significant health risk when some of the ‘young/healthy’ are likely to infect ‘older/vulnerable’ church family. Perhaps you see how I’m thinking that we glorify God by erring on the side of caution for the sake of the most vulnerable in our midst. Ironically, I think pausing our worship might be the most worshipful thing we could do in the current circumstances.

If there is a silver lining to this worship pause, it is that we will have the opportunity to experiment with some non-traditional ways to facilitate our corporate worship. Starting Sunday, we will offer 20-30 minute worship videos so we can continue a shared worship pattern even though we are not worshipping in the same space. I hope recordings will soon give way to a live stream option; we could consider keeping that live stream available even after our worship returns to our usual pattern. (So, imagine worshipping with NRPC while on vacation anywhere in the world.) We’ve also begun to envision some through-the-week ways to touch in with each other without actually touching each other. Keep your eyes on your snail and electronic mailboxes.

Though we will not be gathering for some period of time, we are of course still available by phone and e-mail. You may leave messages at church (919 848-9529) or you may email office@nraleighpc.org, lisahebacker@nraleighpc.org, or brandonmelton@nraleighpc.org. Neither church staff nor your Deacons are going anywhere; we’re still here for you!

Finally, I want to share the illumination from the St. John’s Bible that we would have prayed over at Women’s Spirituality yesterday, had we met.

<http://www.saintjohnsbible.org/Products/GA007000XP/lords-prayer.aspx>

The artwork is of the Lord’s Prayer as it is presented in Matthew’s Gospel. I am calmed and centered by this prayer. “Thy kingdom come” is an ultimate statement of trust. The prayer for “daily bread”, on the other hand, means that my most human of needs – from loaf bread to the bread of God’s word – are never too mundane for God’s care and concern. “Forgive us” is a promise that our reconciliation with God will propel us into reconciling ourselves one to the other. And that last line, “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one” book-ends “Thy kingdom come” with another statement of absolute trust, even with the final chapter of life as we know it.

Do you see the red and blue swipes of color in the artwork? For me those brushstrokes are all of the needs and fears, worries and concerns that are swirling for each of us every day. And the gold shot all through the image? Well, the gold is the divine presence infusing every last bit of our very real lives. Gold is the glimmer of God, meeting us where we are most vulnerable.

I trust that our decision will echo that glimmer of God for the most vulnerable members of our worshipping community. And I look forward to the Sunday when we are able to gather again in our Sanctuary and resume all the other aspects of our shared WORSHIP 🞄 GROW 🞄 SERVE life together. Meanwhile,

Peace be with you,

Lisa Hebacker, Pastor