

May 24, 2020

'Where Do I Go From Here?'
(John 7:1-11, Acts 1:6-14)

Rev. Jane Courtright

Memorial Day weekend has arrived! Although many Memorial services have been cancelled or altered due to the Coronavirus, we pause to remember the roles of our veterans during the grim reality of war. We are also faced with the Wisconsin Supreme Court decision, overturning statewide 'Stay At Home orders.' "This is really the most crucial time, and the most dangerous time," Gov. Mike DeWine of Ohio, said on the CNN program "State of the Union" on Sunday. "All of this is a work in progress. We thought it was a huge risk not to open. But we also know it's a huge risk in opening." Decisions are a pull between public health concerns and the economy.

This weekend also begins the tourism season here in northern Wisconsin, including the muskie fishing season, and many more activities. Many people are traveling north to stay in their cottages and other facilities. This season provides much needed employment and adds millions of dollars to the economy. Our local News Review reports that visitors spent \$241.3 million dollars last year in Vilas County, and that in 2018, tourism supported 2,081 jobs. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is still to be felt as spring and summer proceed.

The comfort level of taking part in reopening businesses and other organizations varies from person to person, according to their situation. "Reopening is not back to normal. It is trying to find ways to allow people to get back out to do things they want to do, and business to do business," said Dr. Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer at the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. "We can't pretend the virus has gone away. The vast majority of the population is still susceptible."

Churches are wondering when congregations can gather safely. It's a confusing time for many congregations. In some cases, congregations are itching to get back to church — masks or no masks. Church leaders are leading in a moment of uncertainty. The guidance is unclear, and the pressure is great. The majority of churches and other Houses of Worship are deciding on the side of safety for its worshippers.

We at First Congregational UCC, like many other churches, have made some transition to online worship and virtual meetings. People like you, continue to financially support our church. As a church, we continue to support our members and friends with online worship, discussion groups, drive by visits, phone calls, virtual meetings and more. We are following the safety guidelines offered by the Badger Bounce-back Plan and our Wisconsin Conference UCC. Even when we someday do return to our beloved worship sanctuary to worship, safety practices will make our worship look different for some time. We may wear facemasks, practice social distancing, refrain from singing or perhaps worship outside.

Meanwhile, reports of armed 'Safe at Home' protests, troubling interactions between customers, even murder, reach us through the news. My experience has thus far been respect, helpfulness and kindness. However, many other people speak of unpleasant experiences. Jonathan Merritt wrote in The Atlantic, "If the coronavirus is a test of our collective character, some American Christians are flat-out failing... The earmark of Christianity is kindness, compassion, and supernatural love," It's not fighting back, attacking enemies, settling scores, or leveraging other people's pain for your own advancement. Some of the most visible Christians in America, it seems, need to go back to Sunday school and discover the loving roots at the core of this great religion's message."

Meanwhile, the question we are asking **ourselves** is "Where do we go from here?"

That is the question Jesus' disciples asked themselves! We heard in our Acts reading that after Jesus left them, the disciples stood with their mouths hanging open and their minds bewildered.

They didn't know what to do or where to go next! Fortunately, messengers from God challenged them, "You Galileans!—why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly—and mysteriously—as he left."

With that message, the disciples were ready to return to Jerusalem - the next step in their journey. They stay together to pray and wait. Nothing is clear to them as they wait, except the promise of Jesus that their ministry would go on. They would move on from Holy Week, though nothing would ever be the same! Thank God that they had this promise from Jesus: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

We, much like the early disciples, may be tempted at this juncture in our Coronavirus journey, to stand open-mouthed and bewildered, unsure of how we feel and what to do next. As contemporary disciples, let us not strain **our** heads toward the sky, wondering what happened. Our challenge today is to return to a small room and wait with prayer and faith as we discover where God will lead us next.

Our reading from Acts is a reminder that there is no such thing as returning to normal. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have announced the reign of God. Jesus leaves them in charge of the mission, and advises them to stay-at-home "until you have been clothed with power from on high." Jesus seems to be saying to his followers, "Don't be in such a hurry to take the tarp off your fishing boats!" Whatever future God promises them, it is anything but a return to "normal."

Then, having appointed them to continue his ministry, Jesus ascends. What does Ascension really mean? According to one definition, "...is the path of those who are choosing to consciously step into a higher level of light. It's a personal choice to boldly step into the unknown in order to expand into an experience that is entirely new. Ascension is actively choosing to evolve into higher consciousness." It is also a sign of divinity.

Still, the disciples, including each of us, ask, "Where do we go from here?" Jesus' early disciples are just starting to understand. **We** are just beginning to glimpse the next steps on our Coronavirus path. Meanwhile, we wait for the Spirit's power.

Many of us yearn for things to get "*back to normal*." Yet our Acts reading reminds us that this won't happen. The disciples are being sent **not back** to Jerusalem, but forward into the future **by way** of Jerusalem. We also will not be going backward. We are sent into the future by way of Covid-19. Jesus' resurrection is proof that things will no longer be normal.

Let's listen to God, who directs us to go stay in place a bit and to wait and pray. This week, our readings remind us that the way forward will be a Spirit-led journey into new places. Let's keep our eyes and hearts open as God says to us:

"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:19)

It's the good news we need to hear! It reminds us that our ministry will go on post-Covid-19 (whenever that may be). Like those first disciples, let us together, set our feet *back toward* the future. AMEN.