

“GETTING READY TO GATHER.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Psalm 122:1; 35:18; 42:4

Prayer:

Introduction.

I have shared with you our joy in having all our sons and their families home for a week. It is a special joy to Phama and me that when Reed and Jenea come up from California, all our other sons want to be in on the time together. So Kent and Becky came up from Snoqualmie. There were times when Phama and I would sit in the midst of the noise and laughter and look at each other and smile. It felt like a taste of heaven.

Growing up our boys seemed more like mortal enemies. So much meanness and unkindness. “Kind or quiet” was a constant mantra in our home. Phama prayed earnestly that they would be friends.

Now not only are they friends and actually enjoy spending time together, but there is the added grace that all their wives like each other and get along great, and seek out spending time together. Grace upon grace. It is humbling that God has shown us this much kindness.

In a healthy and happy home, children delight in going home, and delight when brothers and sisters gather. That is how it should be, it isn’t always, but that is how it should be. It’s what we hope and pray for.

I was talking with a church member recently who has a family member who has cut themselves off from the rest of the family. It is cause for sadness, it’s not supposed to be that way. We feel that isolation, that loneliness, and we long for restoration, for reconciliation, to be family again.

Healthy families live together, laugh together, cry together, help and support each other. Healthy families love each other and love to be together.

One of the metaphors in Scripture for the children of God, for Christians is a family with God as our Father and we as brothers and sisters to each other. One of the dynamics of a happy and health family is the desire to come home and to be with our brothers and sisters.

Psalms regarding gathering for worship.

This is what David is expressing in these Psalms, his utter delight in being able to go home to the house of the Lord.

David's joy is a double joy, it is twofold. *First*, that he is able to go up to the house of the Lord to worship. And *second*, that the people want to go as well.

By David's example our joy should also be double. *First*, that God has placed in our hearts a desire to worship Him in the assembly, in the gathering, and *second*, that God has placed that same desire in the hearts of others so that we aren't alone, and can be united in faith and worship.

This is no small thing, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. Consider that the majority of mankind ignore God, resist God, have no interest in God, let alone even worship Him as God. Given that reality, it is actually cause for worship that we ourselves have this desire and that we are not alone in it but we have many brothers and sisters who want to join us in worship.

We have for so long taken for granted worshiping together that we have forgotten the miracle of grace it is. One, to desire it at all, and two, to not be alone in it but surrounded by others with the same desire.

Psalm 42 speaks of a time in David's life when he was kept from public worship of his God.

That God has kept us from worshiping together these months is a most sober thing, and we should give it serious consideration in each of our hearts about our attitudes about worship and about each other. One of God's purposes for this time is to help us treasure the reality that a church is a gathering.

Matthew Henry reflects on this saying, "Sometimes God teaches us effectually to know the worth of mercies by the want of them, and whets our appetite for the means of grace by cutting us short in those means. We are apt to loathe that manna, when we have plenty of it, which will be very precious to us if ever we come to know the scarcity of it" (Psalm 42, p. 394).

Psalm 42:1-4 As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

David is thirsty, parched for corporate worship. Private worship is good and important and ought not to be neglected. No one was better at it than David, but that's not enough and not meant to be in God's eyes. We are called all of us to assemble together to honor our God and hear His Word and encourage each other.

Getting ready to gather.

The elders are calling us next week to go to the house of the Lord. As we get ready to do that let me give you some things to think about and consider as we anticipate next Sunday. Let's begin with a reminder of why we want to gather together.

Why it is important we seek to gather together unless your health is in danger.

First, from the beginning it has not been good for man to be alone. When God said that in Genesis he was not just thinking about getting Adam a wife. God was think much bigger than that, He was thinking family, society, civilization, community. It is not good to be isolated, we are created to be in community and fellowship. Even God Himself is not alone, but in community with Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We know the challenges of long-distance relationships and how difficult they are and how undesirable. We were not made for that.

We are all familiar with the over used phrase “social distancing” and I think we are growing to dislike it. In a way it is an oxymoron, how do you be social from a distance?

Think about the metaphors Scripture use to describe the church. The body of Christ, the family of God, God’s household, the Temple made up of living stones with Christ as the cornerstone. They all imply a corporate community.

I Peter 2:9 You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

We are not created and called to be independent Christians, but interdependent, the way the parts of our body are, the way the materials that make up a building are. When a part is dislocated or separated it is painful.

The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion, our faith is personal but not private. It is meant to be shared and lived together. God never calls us out of the world and just leave us, He calls us into His church.

Second, the preaching of the Word of God is meant to be live and in person. Our digital and technological age has made it possible for us to listen to sermons on our computers and phones. We can listen to John Piper or Ravi Zacharias or R. C. Sproul or whoever our favorite might be. And over these past four months you have gotten used to watching me through Wifi on a screen.

But that isn’t how it is supposed to be for at least two reasons. *First*, doing that can turn the preaching of God’s Word into a consumer event, where we get to pick and choose whatever tickles our ears or agrees to our liking or preferences. We get to control it all, without any relationship or accountability.

Second, preaching is meant to be done by a shepherd to his sheep, by the pastor of God’s calling to the people of His appointing. It is meant to be embodied, in the flesh. We are meant to be fed the Word of God in the moment according to our need and together as a family. It should be by a shepherd who knows us and loves us and whom we know and love, warts and all.

Listening to TV preachers is like social distancing, it is safe, it keeps us from knowing and being known, from any accountability. We can benefit from listening from others, but that is not a substitute for embodied, in the flesh, in-person preaching.

God could have sent angels, but He sent flesh and blood pastors, who are like us, part of the family, that we could see, hear, touch, weep and rejoice with.

Third, of course there is the singing. There is nothing like congregational singing, filling this place with praise to God. It glorifies God and it encourages us. Many of us wouldn't dare to sing a solo, and if that was our only option we would never sing. Our faith is a singing faith, and being together helps us be able to give voice to our emotions, our feelings toward God.

My devotions each week included a hymn or song. And there is fruit in reading them, but it's not the same as singing them with hundreds of others.

I have an expectation about next Sunday morning, that our worship will be more joyful, that our singing will be louder and more heart felt. Our joy in finally having the freedom to be together needs to be expressed outwardly to God for His glory.

Psalm 95:1-3 Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
3 For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Fourth, God has given to the church the grace gifts of the sacraments and we need to gather to celebrate them. We have been waiting to do a baptism and to share the Lord's Supper together. It is the family meal for when the family is together. We need to gather to proclaim the Lord's death and show in a tangible way what the Gospel is. These are the means of God's grace we can't experience alone or in isolation.

Now we have a clear picture of why we should gather. I think most of you already thought that, though you might not have been able to come up with all those specific reasons.

Let's talk a little about how we will gather. I trust have read the letter from the elders. Those without email will be getting a copy early this week.

How we will gather.

Most of us have been very anxious, even to the point of impatience to gather together for worship. There has been no little frustration with the limitations on our freedoms.

Our elders have wrestled well with all the various issues and recommendations coming at them from the government, from the denomination, from the insurance company, and from all the individual voices expressing a wide variety of opinions.

One of the things I appreciated about the elders meetings is how they honored and respected each other. They listened to each other, they welcomed opposing views. No yelling, no name calling, no saying that's dumb or stupid. They genuinely worked at finding the best way forward.

They made a bunch of judgment calls, some of them might be wrong, but they did the best they could with what they knew at the time. They reserve the right to change or correct along the way. We don't have to agree with everything they decided, but we do have to love them, support them, and pray for them.

We are all aware of how divided our country is, and churches are a microcosm of our culture, and ours is no different. We have a wide range of opinions and convictions among us. Some are eager to meet in person and others think it is too soon. I know of a couple of churches in the county that are going to wait until we are in phase four to open.

How can we do this and stay unified? It won't be easy, in fact, it will only happen by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit and our prayers for unity and not division.

I say this to prepare you that next Sunday is not going to solve all our issues or make all our frustrations go away. Next Sunday won't be normal, starting with two services to create safe distances. You will see pews blocked off, no pew cushions or hymnals or Bibles, no greeters, no nursery. The changes are not permanent, just temporary until we can see how it goes.

For our part we need to exercise humility, patience and some self-sacrifice, making allowances for each other. By all means let us avoid thinking the worst about each other.

Face masks

But while reopening for worship is wonderful and we will be glad to be back in worship, I am aware of one big issue that could ignite our sense of our division, facemasks.

Let me tread where angels fear to tread and say a word about facemasks. It still boggles my mind how this has become such point of contention. Satan can take such a small thing and make it a source of division in our country and in our churches.

Some want them, some don't. some get angry being told they have to wear them and some get angry when everyone isn't. Both sides have their articles supporting why they are important or why they don't really do any good. There are experts on both sides. Have you noticed how incredibly confident everyone is about their opinion even when all the experts disagree?

In the letter from the elders they have said when we gather facemasks are encouraged and will be made available. Why didn't they say required? Two reasons, first, you are all adults and you know what the government has said. Second, the elders don't want to be put in the role of having to police this. That seemed like a lose-lose to them.

I found the article in the Bellingham Herald on Friday remarkably sane and helpful. A spokesperson for the Whatcom County Health Department said:

“People shouldn't feel like they have to confront others who are not wearing masks in public. We urge people to have compassion for others.... Don't blame or shame people with different views ... share your concerns in a kind and compassionate way and listen to theirs.”

If you are uncomfortable “We suggest people simply take steps to protect themselves by moving 6 feet away.”

Let's all show humility and grace and compassion. Kind or quiet.

I would like to see some of the passion and energy being expressed over facemasks directed to sharing the Gospel and loving our hard to love neighbor and pursuing family worship and killing our besetting sins like pride, gossip, anger, stubbornness, critical spirit, self-righteousness.

Implications and application.

I call us to worship together next Sunday, but on one condition, that we come together with a heart for unity, a unity grounded in our being the body of Christ, brothers and sisters who love Jesus and each other, who make allowances for one another, who count others better than themselves. Come because you want to come home and to honor your Father and see your brothers and sisters.

We already live in a fractured and fragmented world, let our gathering be a reflection to the world of what unity and love looks like. That doesn't mean uniformity, that doesn't mean agreement on the issues, the problems or the solutions. It simply means that we lay our differences aside and show deference to one another, we respect each other as a part of the body of Christ. We can disagree and still like and respect each other.

Psalm 133 Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.

Psalm 122:1 I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”