

May 28, 2020

Dear Church Family,

I look forward to this Lord's Day. I want you to be aware we are celebrating the Lord's Supper. Please prepare some form of juice and bread, so that you will be ready when we come to that portion of the worship service. If I have counted correctly, this is our 11th worship service via DVD/CD format. It has been a joy to see how the Lord has blessed. I believe that I can speak not only for myself, but also for Ron and all of the deacons, that it has definitely been a labor of love.

And now the reopening on June 07 is drawing near. Please pray as we make final preparations. We want to be led of the Lord in this. As I mentioned last week, I want to say a word about communicating grace to one another relative to the reopening. There are very differing attitudes in the larger culture relative to the COVID-19 virus, and I suspect we have a wide range of reactions within our church community as well – as to government guidelines, interpretation of scientific data, the phases of reopening the economy and life in general, etc. And by extension, there may well be differing opinions about reopening the church.

As I have followed the larger Christian community concerning COVID-19 in general, and specifically the reopening of churches, I have seen some widely differing positions. On one far end of the spectrum are individuals and churches who see the risks of COVID-19 as being overblown, and the wearing of face masks and observing social distancing as unnecessary or at least not as important as what is being communicated. They would likely see a hesitation to reopen a church right now as evidence of a lack of trust in God and His protection. At the other far extreme are individuals and churches who say that coming back together in the church building anytime soon is too great a risk, and believe that trusting God does not mean being foolhardy. I find myself somewhere between these two extremes.

As I have sought the Lord in His Word concerning this, I have found an interesting parallel with Jewish Christians who struggled with letting go of old Jewish dietary laws and judged Gentile believers for being "too loose" in what they ate. On the other side, Gentiles criticized Jewish believers for observing what they considered irrelevant religious guidelines.

Paul jumped into the fray in his letter to the church in Rome. "Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters. One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat **must not judge** one who does, because **God has accepted him**" (Rom. 14:1-3).

Paul did not rebuke either the "carnivores" or the "vegetarians" for what they believed, but he did rebuke them for their attitude. The so-called "weak" group was condemning the other side. The so-called "strong" group was despising them in return.

Paul continues, "Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and he gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. If we live, **we live for the Lord**; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, **we belong to the Lord**" (Rom. 14:6-8).

Whatever we do, we are to do it to honor Christ—and with a heart of thanks. As Paul said to the church in Corinth: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything **for the glory of God**" (1 Cor. 10:31).

So the message for us today is that we are to lovingly, respectfully accept one another. But just leaving each other alone in our respective views is not enough. We must actively work to build one another up in the Lord. Paul exhorts the believers in Rome, "Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister.... For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:13,15).

The world's way is to tell the person with whom you do not agree to grow up and get over it. But the law of love says to stop what you're doing for the sake of the other person—even if you deem your viewpoint as "right." For there is something far more important than being right. The most important thing is to act with love. "Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but **righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit**" (Rom. 14:16-17).

In the context of COVID-19, the kingdom of God is not a matter of facemasks, social distancing, and hand sanitizer, or even the timing and the manner of the reopening of the church. It is about living in the righteousness, peace, joy, and love found in the Holy Spirit. The overarching message for us in God's Word is: Don't judge the other person. Build him up. Don't look down on the other person. Build her up.

When we have come through this pandemic, what will matter . . . what always matters . . . is how we love and treat one another other in the Lord. Let's trust the Lord in the reopening of the church and as we continue through this period of the pandemic. Let's choose to love one another and build one another up in the Lord. In doing so, we honor Him, and He is revealed in and through us.

Blessings and warm greetings to each one of you!

Pastor Dennis