



When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again;
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love *will* come again, like wheat that springeth green.

"Now the Green Blade Riseth'" by C. Michael Hawn

Dear Friends,

It might not look like anything is happening, but goodness me there is a lot of stuff going on. And there is pervasive pastoral anxiety as more and more families are being touched by Covid. We have lost brothers and parents and friends, and several families are in the thick of it now. The joyful parts of life continue too. Recently Elizabeth Otteson married Craig Bertani, Bobbi and Jim Otteson's daughter Jessamy gave birth to Valerie Elizabeth, and I just heard today that Lucas and Eppie Clemons have a son David. So much smiling and joy

On the Church front, the question is, "Who will we be post COVID?" This period of isolation has tended to make us lose sight of our existence as a body, the body of Christ. And yet a moment of reflection should bring us quickly to the conclusion that we are singularly inadequate — no one of us has enough knowledge, education, skill or grace to function alone. I believe that is how God designed it to be. We inevitably rely on others, even when we are apart, especially for wisdom and grace. Those of us who retreat from our neighbors will find that we are left behind. Those of us who understand this part of our commission as Christians will continue to seek each other out. And not far away now, almost within sight, is our physical regathering, in small numbers at first, but then without restriction.

What will we have learned? How will we have changed? We keep saying in Vestry that God has put us into each others care, and it is true. The lessons are as old as the hills. Life is short; love God and your neighbor; and do not allow singularity or self to distort those priorities, these God-given responsibilities and privileges.

Perhaps March will allow some small gathering. That's your optimistic Senior Warden speaking. Won't it be fun? I'm quite looking forward it. In the meantime let's get ready.

Your friend in Christ,
Michael



**Ash
Wednesday**

Ash Wednesday is on February 17. One way or another we will distribute ashes, and plans are in the works. And there will be a Lenten program that we can all join in from home.

CARES Act Charitable Giving Tax Implications

New charitable deduction for taxpayers who do not itemize. Beginning in 2020, individuals can deduct \$300 in charitable contributions from their gross income even if they do not itemize their deductions. Donations must be made in cash to a charity.

No required minimum distributions, but qualified charitable distributions still possible. The CARES Act eliminates required minimum distributions (RMDs) from many retirement plans in 2020. Some donors have been using their RMDs for tax-advantaged charitable gifts by making a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) directly to charity. Under the CARES Act it is still possible for donors who are 70½ or over to contribute up to \$100,000 directly to a charity without paying tax on the distribution.

No cap on charitable deductions for taxpayers who do itemize. Donors who itemize their deductions can usually deduct cash contributions up to 60% of their adjusted gross income. For 2020, that cap is lifted, and donors contributing cash to charity may deduct up to 100% of their income.

Annual Meeting

Usually we hold our annual meeting at the end of January. We approve the budget, elect vestry members, hear ministry reports, and honor those who need honoring. As you no doubt realize, we cannot gather in person this year. Assembling and voting virtually are impractical, if not impossible. After making sure we are in compliance with State regulations for churches and with church canons, the Vestry has postponed our annual meeting until May 2 when we should be able to gather outside in representative numbers for worship.

The Budget

Our tradition is to present the budget to the congregation and ask for its approval. Church laws allow the vestry to pass the budget on behalf of the congregation. At our January meeting, the Vestry resolved to use the 2020 budget as our guideline for 2021 until such time as circumstances become clearer or change.

Vestry Elections

Wardens are elected for a single-year term. Kris Warehime and Diane Spitzack have agreed to stay on for another year as Senior and Junior Wardens, respectively. Drew Meyer's term is up and we have one spot which was unfilled in 2020. We are looking for nominations as soon as possible to appoint two new members to fill those vacancies in the interim.

update
**St. Paul's
Pantry**

Many thanks to Gary Johnson and Carol McKernan for distributing the food in our food pantry to Rachel's Light and Community Pathways. There is some food left in the pantry should the need arise, but we will need to restock once we return to church.

Preparing to Return to Church

As the Covid numbers in Minnesota improve, we are planning for our return to church. ECMN has established the following criteria before that can happen:

1. The positivity rates of both the state and county must have been under 5% for at least one week.
2. Our plans for opening buildings for ministries, outside groups, and limited capacity in-person worship must be approved.

Although we do not anticipate returning before March at the earliest, the Vestry has been talking about what worship will look like for us when that moment comes. Things we are considering:

- How many people can be safely seated in the sanctuary and throughout the church?
- Can worshipers be seated in other rooms and listen over the speakers?
- Is more than one service needed?
- Do people sign up to attend a service? And if so, how?
- How and who will sanitize between and after services?
- What changes are needed to the service in order to shorten the length of time in the sanctuary?
- How to safely distribute communion?
- How do we continue to have an online service for those who are not ready to return to in-person worship?
- How do we direct the flow of traffic?
- Air quality/flow is an issue in our small space. Can we introduce measures to improve it?

This is the outline plan at the moment:

- Two services of less than 30 minutes each, at 10:00 and 11:00.
- There is less risk involved in having a small crowd, then moving to a larger crowd, than vice versa.
- We will be sanitizing between services.
- We will have limited, socially-distanced seating in the sanctuary. We are estimating no more than 20 people but have not yet arrived at a final figure. We are uncertain about seating people elsewhere in the building, although all vestry members are in favor or pursuing this route.
- Parishioners will need to sign up for worship to make sure no one need be turned away at the door for lack of seating. Those who are not electronically/digitally connected are asked to find someone who is to be their registrar.
- Masks will be required, and hand sanitizing on entering the church.
- There will be no singing, but we hope for instrumental music.

We will share more details as we know them, and would be happy to hear ideas, suggestions from you, as well as from those willing to help — for example in sanitizing church between/after services, when the time comes. Moreover any help in video recording readings, prayers, music will be very gratefully received.

Online Worship

Our Facebook Group

Our Sunday Videos have attracted a very loyal audience. We can see who watches if they are part of our Saint Paul's FB group, or if they "like" the video. Our FaceBook group has grown from 125 to 170 people, the vast majority of whom are past and present members of the Parish. About 20 are friends and family. We see an average 95 people watching every Sunday, and we know there are invisible watchers too. In addition, people watch on our other "outward facing" FaceBook page, and on our webpage (stpaulsowatonna.org) or the Vimeo group. Usually the video is shared at least once, and often twice, so that adds watchers.

How Many People?

According to FaceBook, about 4 out of every 10 people watch with other people. So add those numbers up and multiply by 1.4. For example 130 people times 1.4 is 182. In other words, we reach a very substantial number of people every single Sunday. We should mention that another 6-12 people will watch later on CDs made and distributed by Leanne. Interestingly, if everyone who watches were to contribute \$3 a week (over and above existing pledges) our COVID budgetary problems would be solved!

Balancing Online and In-Person Worship

So somehow, when we get back to Church, we have to stay connected with our online-only folk. If you have thoughts or ideas about how to balance these things, please share!

Are You Anti-FaceBook?

If you are online but don't want to get entangled in FaceBook, there are now 3 other options for you:

1. The service is posted on Vimeo about 12 hours after it is on Facebook. You can get there by going to stpaulsowatonna.org and clicking on the link on the front page.
2. Go directly to Vimeo (vimeo.com/groups/stpaulsowatonnasermons)
3. Go to the outward facing FB page (facebook.com/StPaulsOwatonna) and click on the worship video. Although you will be prompted to sign in or join up, just scroll past. You don't have to join in order to watch.

Treasurer's Report

Our offerings were down approximately \$30,000 from 2019, which had been a good year. We received \$21,000 in payroll protection funds (forgivable loan) in June. Over the course of the year, we made two PIF withdrawals for \$5000 each. It's not uncommon to withdraw \$10,000 or more from PIF in a year.

After a significant loss in investments the first quarter of 2020 (\$38,000), we have bounced back to \$224,000 in investments, only \$3,000 less than where we left off in 2019, and that's including the withdrawals!

We are keeping afloat and greatly appreciate all that's been given. The challenge in 2021 is to find the \$30,000 deficit again.

Leaven is published monthly to keep the people of St. Paul's informed and united in thought.

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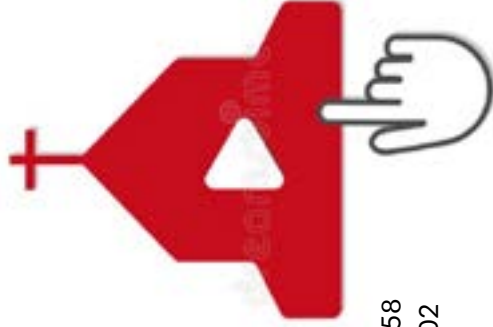
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