



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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June 12, 2020

Dear Saints of God in Christ,

I am so thankful for this congregation of God's people; I know I am not worthy to be your pastor. You have weathered the "coronavirus" storm, so to speak, beautifully. We have endured a season that is not only difficult, but also unpredictable and fraught with frequent changes.

As we prepare to enter "the Wilderness" with Israel, we will witness our forefathers grumbling and complaining. God is patient with them, but nonetheless they bear the consequences of their bitterness: death in the wilderness. Few things are more deadly to a church than grumbling.

I am greatly encouraged because as we have changed the service format, the service time, the number of services, the location of the services, the technology needed for the services that there has been so little complaining and push back. As Session evaluates the data each week, we strive to provide both clear communication as well as create an environment for the public praising of God that is as safe as possible for as many as possible to attend.

We tried worshiping in the Fellowship Hall last Lord's Day and, while the singing sounded especially robust and we are able to accommodate more people, we'll be back in the auditorium (sanctuary) this Lord's Day for both services. We'll continue to have an audio-visual feed of the service in the Fellowship Hall in case we need to use it as an overflow site.

Today is the day Governor Kemp's stay at home order expires for the "medically fragile," including those over age 65. With the expiration of this order, many of you who cautiously stayed home may be more inclined to come and worship in person. But if you would rather continue to worship at home until cases and hospitalizations in the Chattanooga area are in steady decline, we encourage you to do so.

If you are over 65 or in a category defined as "medically fragile," and decide to return to worship, Session strongly suggests you attend the 9:00 a.m. service. This is because all attendees of the earlier service are required to wear masks, which drastically reduces the likelihood of an asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic person inadvertently spreading coronavirus with others.

At the 11:00 a.m. service, Session continues to strongly recommend everyone wear masks as well, but this is not a requirement like at the 9:00 a.m. service as we want to accommodate those who are not able to wear a mask for various reasons. We will leave the doors open to circulate air and have some additional fans to pull in outside air for the 11:00 service, but the second service is far more risky to everyone's health than the first, fully masked service.

We are in times that are unique to us; because this virus is completely new, even the experts are baffled to understand how it works. This week there was a rather comical series of articles based on information from the World Health Organization (WHO). In the first group, the articles triumphantly announced asymptomatic transmission of coronavirus was "very rare." But the very next day the same organization announced that study was not reliable, triggering more articles.

Despite the many opinions circulating and even changing recommendations from the American CDC versus WHO, your Session has examined the data and we continue to strive to follow the CDC's precautions and recommendations in hopes of reducing the likelihood of transmission here.

Nonetheless and despite the changing guidance of the medical and government authorities, there are certain things that are undeniable about the coronavirus. First, it spreads very easily. Second, it can be very deadly and unpredictable in terms of its lethality and longterm damage. Yes, those who are over age 65 and/or obese, diabetic, have heart disease, etc. are at greater risk for death, but the victims of coronavirus also include young, healthy, athletic people as well. Right now, the medical community does not understand why the new coronavirus works this way.

Because of the many unknowns with this virus and the two apparent truths about it (i.e. its highly contagious nature and its apparently unpredictable brutality), *Christians especially should be characterized by humble and cautious attitudes toward this situation.* Regardless of our own opinions, we should be both mindful and loving toward brethren with differing opinions and practices in this (and all!) area. Moreover, we should take great care not to endanger others or give the impression of a cavalier attitude toward the virus.

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. (Romans 14:13-15)

If Paul makes this point regarding irrelevant things like food and drink, how much more should this principle guide us in these times? Many faithful Christians choose not to follow the advice of governmental, medical, and public health experts regarding the protocols for containing the spread of the virus. Other faithful Christians believe the wisest course of action is to give heed to their advice regarding masks, social distancing, and limiting activities.

In any earthly environment there is potential risk. In an environment that does not use the maximum number of possible precautions for cross infection, there is an assumption of personal risk. So we urge you to take that into consideration as you determine if, when, and which service of worship you attend at this time.

In our efforts, we are trying to strike a balance in our church life. We are striving to protect the weakest and most medically vulnerable among us by allowing them to worship in relative safety while also providing an opportunity for the strong and medically low risk to worship while not potentially endangering the health of our weaker members. As we all do this, we must strive to heed the Apostle's command and counsel:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

We appreciate the patience, understanding, and cooperation you have shown as we try to navigate this difficult season and glorify God in the way we look to the interests of others.

Your friend,



Ryan Biese,
Pastor