

Dear Grace Church Van Vorst Family,

Last week Bernice, Henry and I felt cautiously optimistic that opening the doors of Grace and having a small, 9am in-person worship service was the right decision.

We had gone through the Diocesan guidelines for indoor services in the time of COVID 19 with a fine toothed comb. Two Sundays ago Kim and I took the measurements to see how we could position everyone's chair to be twelve feet away from me preaching and six feet away from each other. The reservation form was created, I bought a clear mask so you could see most of my face during worship and half a dozen people made themselves available to be trained as ushers to make sure all of the rules were being followed and to wipe down the chairs afterwards. I sent you a letter listing the high risks groups of people who could be particularly hard hit by COVID and cautioned them to consider carefully whether they should come to worship.

On Saturday night I got an email from a member of our sister church St. Matthew's Lutheran which has joined us for worship during the pandemic as they search for their next priest. In it were many articles about the risks of opening and grave concerns. Since New Jersey has gotten pretty close to containment of the virus and knowing Grace was ready to make worshipping indoors safer than going for a haircut, I still felt confident enough to move ahead.

On Sunday, minutes before worship my phone pinged as I was putting on my alb. I had gotten an email from one of our church mothers, also expressing concerns. Not having time to read the whole thing before the opening hymn, one line in the email caught my eye: "If some of us can't go to worship none of us should go."

This sentence was not about being extra cautious, weighing statistics or risk reduction. It was an example of why I love Grace Church Van Vorst more than any church I've served. The words were about sacrificial love. Like Jesus, they hurt my heart by stretching it.

On his way to the house of someone important, a great crowd gathered around Jesus. His disciples got in front of him, shoved their way through crowds and told Jesus to hurry up. Then some sick woman no one paid any mind to touched the hem of Jesus clothes. As soon as he felt her need Jesus stopped, refusing to move another step until he could see and talk to her.

Some rowdy kids, (who wouldn't be comfortable at the 9am indoor service we had planned for next week), came running to Jesus and when the adults tried to pull them away Jesus stopped them and everything else to spend time with the kids.

The Lord talked about the last being first in the Kingdom of Heaven. Both urgent and not in a hurry, Jesus' way of being in the world is backwards. He also made it clear that the ninety-nine sheep would be on their own until he found his lost one.

Given his track record, chances are if the Grace Church Van Vorst is not safe enough at the moment for Joyce to come to after bypass surgery or for the kids to run around in, Jesus won't even show up.

Bishop Carlye has spoken to the clergy in our Diocese about this as a time in the wilderness for the church. When Jesus went into the wilderness the Liar came to talk to him. The Liar tried to show him several ways to move forward with his ministry that wouldn't involve pain. Jesus said "no" to all of them. That's because there is no such thing as love without pain and Beloved, Jesus loves you. He loves you so much he never questioned taking the longer, more costly way.

The reason I miss you and you miss each other so very much is because Jesus has made us family. And since Jesus can't spare even one of us, if some of us can't go to church Bernice, Henry and I surrender to the truth that none of us should go. **Our virtual, 11am service will continue on Sunday morning, but for now instead of having indoor worship at 9am, we'll hang back with Jesus and wait.**

After all of these months, not knowing when we'll gather again in person is bitter. But maybe in the sadness of this time we are being invited to pick up our cross and draw closer to our Lord. While the cross is loneliness and longing, you can tell by the way it stretches your heart that the cross is also the way of love.

On this hard way of love, know we are with you.

Your Brother and Sisters in Christ,

Rev. Laurie, Henry and Bernice