

Dear Friends,

Last weekend, Peter and Mary Lou and I agreed that if we had a worship service this Sunday, I would lead it. It's now clear we won't have worship services for a long time to come. While our pastor is on his way back from South Carolina, I'd like to share a few thoughts along the lines of what I would have liked to share with you in person.

I want you all to know that our worship committee is working on ways that we can keep the congregation connected in prayer and Bible study and loving community, even while we are not together in person. For now, if you have a prayer request, please give it to Ann in the office at (413) 532-0500 or churchoffice@thesteepinthefalls.org

The healing stories of Jesus often have themes both of sickness and of social isolation. In Mark chapter 5 and Luke chapter 8, a man lives among the tombs because he suffers from an unclean spirit who causes him to run around screaming and gashing himself with stones. His community has tried to keep him among them by tying him up with chains and shackles. But he is too strong and breaks the chains. So they banished him to live among the tombs out on the mountainside. After Jesus heals the man, he begs him to let him become one of his followers. Jesus says no. Instead, he tells the man "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you." Reconnecting with his people is part of his healing.

In Luke chapter 17, Jesus arrives in a village. He encounters ten lepers. Lepers lived in isolation from everyone else. Kind of like we're doing now. Except the lepers at least had each other. I am a person who usually enjoys solitude, and even now I'm not spending whole days alone, I often have the company of my daughter or my sweetie or both. But right now I'd kinda love to have a leper colony to hang out with. Anyone else feeling that way?

Anyway, the lepers stand at a proper social distance and they shout over the 6 feet or more to Jesus "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priests. Showing yourself to the priest is something you do after you have been healed. The priest performs a ritual— who knows if they were still using the ritual from hundreds of years before in Leviticus, or if things had changed, but that's an elaborate ritual involving sprinkling and sacrifice. And then after that, you can be re-connected with your community. The ten lepers start walking, and only then after they've started walking, they realize they have been healed.

We are staying apart right now in an effort not to get sick. This is important and necessary. But isolation has costs, too. It's easy for human beings to lose heart when we are separated from each other. We feel sad, we don't take good care of ourselves, we focus on stressful or scary things. We may be losing money if our work depends on in-person contact. If we are in a position where our family makes more demands on us than we make on them, we may be overworked and exhausted from being at home with them all the time. And, for those of us who primarily think of church as "that place

we go to get together and worship,” it may feel as if that support has abruptly disappeared from our lives.

So this is a call to do a few different things.

First, pray. Enjoy the extra time in solitude that you have to pray, or lock yourself in the bathroom away from your family members if you have to, but pray. We can do nothing else without the fuel of prayer.

Second, connect.

Pick up the phone and call someone, write a card, write an email. Call someone who needs your loving support; call someone who will be a loving support for you.

Third, serve.

For people holed up with their families: If you have someone in your household who usually does more than their fair share of the work, you have got to change that or else you may not survive this. I am not kidding. Take an honest look at your family dynamics and find ways that the people who usually serve less can start serving more. If you are the person who takes care of most other people’s demands, and you make very few demands of your own, START DEMANDING. Or else you may not survive this. I am not kidding.

For people on their own, or in less demanding households: Find a way to serve other members of your community who are in need. Service is the most powerful medicine for loneliness. Check on your neighbors. Check on church members who could suffer a lot due to isolation. Think about who is most severely impacted in our community. Our food pantry has already organized a car-hop food service in the parking lot, lacking only roller skates, and I understand a delivery service is not far off. Medical organizations and organizations that serve the poor are always in need of donations, but right now they are in severe and sudden need of donations. Arts organizations might not seem like the most immediate need, but without the ability to hold events and teach classes, seemingly stable organizations can fold quickly. If your own income isn’t dropping much due to this crisis, write a check to any organization that you hope will still exist six months from now. (Don’t forget to mail in your pledge to church, too.)

Fourth, let’s all be kind to ourselves.

This is hard on everyone and it is not anyone’s fault. It’s okay if the house isn’t perfect, or if you didn’t get as much work done today as you wanted, or if you’re eating take-out four nights a week. (Actually, eating take-out four nights a week might be the kindest thing we can do for our South Hadley restaurants at the moment.) Keep comforting and beautiful things around you as much as you can.

Know that God is leading us even now, Jesus Christ is our healer even now, the Holy Spirit is our advocate and our connector even now. Let us reach out and love one another as God has loved us.

Heather