

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Shawnee

Fr. Jonathan Brice, March 15, 2020

Have you ever had a pastor tell you NOT to come to church, or NOT to gather in each other's houses, or NOT to share homemade food? Have you ever heard a sermon about staying away from each other? These are strange times indeed.

However, right now, the most responsible thing we can do is practice social distancing. It doesn't feel natural, and can even feel like we are letting others down. But it is imperative that we do this well. What we do – or in this case, what we don't do – matters.

First, let's acknowledge that it doesn't feel right to distance ourselves. In times of crisis, we come together. We are used to DOING and BEING together. We are social creatures, and we know that social distancing can make people feel isolated and lonely.

However, immediately suspending all gatherings IS the most socially responsible thing to do. We have already taken extreme social measures to address this serious disease — let's not undermine our efforts by moving gatherings from the church to our homes and to other places.

Especially in these next two weeks, if each of us drastically reduces the number of people we interact with, we can flatten the curve. The goal is to slow down the spread of the virus, to give the health care systems a chance to respond.

Some analysts say we are 10 days behind the outbreak in Italy. In this crucial window of time, our individual and collective commitment to minimizing all social interactions can have a massive impact on the local, and perhaps national spread of the coronavirus.

With this bigger goal in mind, here we are, sharing virtual Morning Prayer. We know the Body of Christ is not reduced to where we go and what we do on Sunday. So, in addition to practicing social distancing, let's consider what it looks like to be church in these circumstances.

In the short time I've been here, I've shared your annual meeting, a vestry away day and then this week we held a marathon meeting as your vestry became a task force.

Do you know what is truly exceptional about the St. Luke's vestry? When we come together, no one brings a personal agenda, or leads with their egos. Instead they assemble with the common goal of prayerfully representing each member of the St. Luke's congregation. In their heads and hearts, they hold each of you as they make decisions. They know your children and grandchildren. And whether your extended families come on Sundays or not, St. Luke's is their home church too.

Even before this pandemic erupted, the vestry was prompted by the Holy Spirit to start imagining what church might look like in fresh, relevant ways.

Starting immediately, one fresh expression of being church is "**St. Luke's Vines & Branches.**" We have formed new groups or "branches", each coordinated by a current vestry member. You will be contacted by your Vestry leader, and invited to help strengthen and grow your vine.

Research shows that when crisis strikes, a key component of resiliency is CONNECTION. Our vine groups are designed to keep our church family well-connected.

Your vine group can figure out what works best for you. Experiment together. It could be a private Facebook group where you share photos, inspirational updates and prayer requests. Perhaps the "What's App" or "GroupMe" will be your preferred method. You might have a group email thread, and take turns sharing inspirational thoughts, as well as posing a question, to which you "reply all" to learn more about each other's stories. Or maybe you connect through old fashioned phone calls. However you approach it, take this opportunity to grow deeper relationships.

And maybe our younger friends and family members can help us with ideas around virtual connections. One younger member who is fit and healthy has offered to run errands and do doorstep deliveries for our more vulnerable members. We each have a role to play, as we discover our gifts and purpose within this new season of being church.

We don't have to limit our practice of creating vine groups to our church family. Does your neighborhood have a Facebook group or some other virtual social network? You can model what it looks like to practice social distancing, while also creating deeper connections with people who aren't part of a faith group. Regardless of our beliefs, we all share a deep human need for connection.

Caring is at the heart of connectedness. Listen to people, and listen to God. Engage through empathy, as you give others a safe space to share anxieties, concerns and ideas. Conversation by conversation, you can change the atmosphere, create connections and strengthen relationships.

And never underestimate the power of prayer. Before Shara and I were married, we had three years of international courtship. In the days before internet and mobile phones, that meant sending lots of airmail letters, and ringing up expensive long distance phone bills. Despite the cost of connecting, we would pray together, over the phone. And as we both knelt before God's Holy altar, the thousands of miles between us disappeared, and we felt a deep closeness to each other. The truth is, when we unleash the power of prayer in our lives, unfathomable things begin to happen. In fact, during this time of social distancing, as we intentionally pray for news way to connect with each other and be the church in these circumstances, the Holy Spirit could do more than we have dreamt possible.

One thing is for sure, this isn't church as we know it . . . tell your kids and grandkids, now is the time to help shape and redefine what it means to BE church. During this Lenten period, we are faced with a challenge, and an opportunity, unlike anything we've seen in our lifetimes.

By the power of the Spirit, our vine groups might be a way to incubate precious plants in the shelters of our home. As we nurture relationships with each other, we grow deeper roots of shared stories and more authentic connection. When the climate changes, and we can come together again, we will transplant these relationships and find that God has grown a rich and vibrant garden. This life-giving garden isn't just for our church family, but will have richer resources to share with our community.

At St. Luke's Episcopal Church, we are ordinary people, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to do extraordinary things together. That's what it means to be the church in a time such as this.

Jesus is our true vine, and we are the branches. As we remain in Him, we will bear much fruit. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. To our Father's glory, may He guide, bless and sustain us in good health. Remain in His love, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN