

March 22, 2020

Ephesians 5: 8-14

Prayer: Dear God, please make your presence felt in these trying times. We know you are with us, but sometimes it's hard to feel it. Please give us wisdom and discernment, boldness and compassion as we walk through these days. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

In This Time

Hello. I am Deb Richardson-Moore and I'm the pastor at the Triune Mercy Center in Greenville, SC.

For nearly 15 years, we have worshiped together in this place – the doctors and the mentally disabled, the teachers and the addicted, the lawyers and the formerly incarcerated. Black and white and brown, housed and homeless, mentally healthy and mentally ill, strong-bodied and disabled, privileged and marginalized, people of different sexual and gender orientations.

We have made it a point to reflect what we believe the kingdom of God will look like.

But I gotta admit: This public health crisis known as the coronavirus has laid us low. The thought of churches closed this morning all across the United States, all across the world, absolutely breaks my heart.

For in all the ways we get it wrong as the body of Christ, the one thing we got right, was *we kept coming back*. Week in and week out, year in and year out, the church kept meeting for communal worship.

We paused once a week to join our God in *this* place. We prayed together. We heard uplifting or down-and-dirty music. We laughed. We cried. We read Scripture. We attempted to connect those ancient words to our modern world.

The very bedrock of our life at Triune was to bring into community those who did not feel welcome anywhere else, and those who thought *Yes, this is a way in which I will love my neighbor*.

And now we cannot do that.

And so in an attempt to salvage something of our communal experience, to keep us connected, I'm going to offer this abbreviated sermon, this little slice of our worship experience. Our art work this morning is "Reaching for the Heavens" by Paul Hanson. And our friend Andre Simpson may or may not drop by to play an original composition. If you worship with us regularly, you know how frequently I say something like that.

As silly as I feel up here speaking to an empty sanctuary with our choir loft under re-construction behind me, I hope it can offer a remnant of our old normal in this sacred place. A reminder of who we are and whose we are until we can gather again.

Our Scripture reading this morning is an appropriate passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If you'd like to read along with me in your Bible, I'm reading from **Ephesians 5: 8-14**.

⁸For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — ⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

¹⁰Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

¹²For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴for everything that becomes visible is light.

Therefore it says,

‘Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,

and Christ will shine on you.’

You know, we have little control over what has happened with this virus. Our control, our freedom to meet, to congregate, to worship

communally has been snatched away. Our ability to eat out, to hear live music, to hold our art auction, to buy toilet paper without guerrilla tactics has been snatched away.

What we are left with are some choices. Choices about how we will behave. How we will live. How we will look back on this time.

Will we cringe at the choices we made? Or will we be proud of them?

You may have seen news reports that a senator from North Carolina chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee. After hearing reports in early February of the impending virus, he wrote an op-ed piece for Fox News. The country, he wrote, was “better prepared than ever before to face emerging public health threats.”

Meanwhile, he quietly sold off between half a million and 1 ½ million dollars of his personal stock in the hospitality industry.

Some folks in Congress are calling for his resignation because of insider trading. I imagine he will look back on this time and cringe.

You probably read about the two brothers in Tennessee who bought up more than 17,000 bottles of hand sanitizer. They sold 300 bottles on Amazon for \$8 to \$70 before getting shut down for price gouging.

They received so much hate email, including death threats, that they ended up donating the rest. *The New York Times* reported that one of them cried during the interview. I imagine they will look back on this time and cringe.

As Paul wrote, **“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly.... ”**

On the other hand, local citizens have called and emailed and written on our Facebook page, begging to know what they can do to help people. They have brought in pop-top bags, which we are giving away more often than usual because we cannot bring people in for hot meals.

Our serving churches are gamely switching to bag lunches that we can hand out in place of the hot meals.

We heard from a woman who needed groceries because she had taken in a whole family when the dad lost his job. I imagine these folks will be able to look back with some measure of pride to know that they reacted with kindness, that they behaved with generosity.

As Paul wrote, **“Live as children of light — for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.”**

As frightening as this time is for us, I think we still know the difference between living with greed as our driving force, and living with compassion as our driving force.

As one TV analyst said, the majority of us will not get the coronavirus. But all of us will feel the effects of the economic downturn – whether it’s job loss, business failure, market losses, even colleges and non-profits that won’t survive.

In this place, we have made a creed out of caring for the homeless, for the poverty-stricken, for the marginalized.

Now is not the time to stop.

Amen.