

19 May 2020

Dear Friends in Christ-

*<sup>3</sup>I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. <sup>4</sup>Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy... <sup>6</sup>For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; <sup>7</sup>for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. – 2 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7*

This week is a bit of a change in my schedule. We have completed Daniel and Victoria's school year. The community garden is officially open and the war on weeds has begun. I'm spending 4-6 hours each day watching the Festival of Homiletics (preaching and interpretation) online and then talking with friends about it and making notes. For the first time since mid-March, I'm not making daily videos, but giving myself a chance to do a reset on my own expectations, so I can be refreshed. Of course, I also have to do the things to be ready for this coming Sunday, so totally refreshed isn't quite possible right now.

Last Thursday, our Church Council decided to wait until Montana enters Phase 3 to resume in-person worship. This wasn't a snap decision, or one made in fear. It was and is a decision of power, love, and self-discipline, as mentioned in 2 Timothy. Given the restrictions that are currently in effect and will remain so in Phase 2, no one on the Council, nor do I, wishes to turn people away from church because we have restricted numbers. There is great discomfort with the idea of church without singing, without communion, and without coffee hour.

While we know things will still be different in Phase 3, the Council believes returning in the least potentially restrictive environment would be best for all of us. This is not an easy choice to make. Many of the churches in our county that have resumed meeting in person either are restricting how many people can come into the building (in accordance with the recommendations) or are small enough in congregational size that they are able to space out appropriately without restrictions. Those who can continue to stream services are doing so.

Speaking of streaming, I would like to share with you that our regular Sunday video streams are being watched, in part or whole, by more than 300 people each week. I do receive messages from our extended church family in Sweet Grass County, in Montana, and beyond. I know some of you are watching several services each week, which is certainly some of our views too. We also have people who have moved away, relatives and friends, and new people to us who are engaged with our services. This is a consolation in this strange time- we are still being used for God's glory and the spread of the gospel.

Eventually we will return to our building. When that happens, there will still be changes- no matter how long we wait. I hope and trust that you will all remain faithful.

As we can do anything outside in the weeks and months ahead, we will certainly plan for that. I am trying to think about how to offer communion in some capacity, with regularity.

I am also aware of the fact that this present situation is not the worst or most difficult time that many of us have experienced. We have been through deaths, estrangements, illnesses, property losses, injuries, griefs, and other situations that have also changed our way of being in the world. We know that God has sustained us through those things and is with us even now. Let us continue to hold fast to that truth and to share it with others.

In peace,

Pastor Julia