

May 22, 2020

**There's More to Come:
An update on mission, endurance, and God's containers**

I've found myself turning time and time again to some of St. Paul's "Greatest Hits," as Pastor Evan calls them. Today, one crept up into my consciousness, from Romans 5:3-5:

³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

And, here it is, again, with a modern-day spin I love:

3-5 *There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!*

In many ways, this time has brought out the best in people, showing a passionate patience and tempered steel that serves us well. On my walks, people I don't know greet me with enthusiasm. We're putting our creativity to work, and now car parades, socially-distanced/masked drop-ins in front yards, Zoom cocktail hours (wait, is that just me?!?), newly minted techies, and the like are part of our new normal.

I'm not surprised. Humans were made for connection, and when put to it, humans figure out how to connect.

But not all is well with humanity. If connections were broken before, the brokenness is amplified in times of trouble. There comes a part of every journey- borne of suffering and troubles- when people get, well, tired. I believe the Bible describes this as "forty days and forty nights," or "forty years," or "for three days." It helps to not get stuck on the literal numbers, but rather understanding these "magic Bible numbers" as describing an experience, which we ourselves know to be true: the most difficult part of a journey is when you simply don't want to do it anymore!

“There’s more to come...” says St. Paul. Is it a promise of better things to come, or a troubling reality? St. Paul never lands on it, one way or another. Instead, St. Paul gives us a way through both, urging us towards endurance, character, and hope. God’s compass points, keeping us from losing our way, pointing us to stay the course.

Maybe what’s most difficult about our journey, now, is we are all experiencing the unknown, together. Generally speaking, humans find an extended period of unknown as disturbing. Which is sort of ironic, since we never know what the next moment will bring. Ever. Maybe we pretend to know what’s coming around the bend, but the truth is, we are all subjected to the unknown at any given moment. We can only take the next moment as it comes, and go from there.

That’s why we need compass points to guide our way. It’s okay (not okay) that we don’t know what’s coming around the bend, we only need to know God holds our future, and head in that direction. We will be given everything we need for the journey. Endurance, character, hope; rounding up as many containers as we can to hold everything that God will generously pour into our lives.

Our containers are getting filled, even as I write. We’ve sprung out of our building and are worshipping as the early Christians did, in our homes. You are sharing the worship services with others, and our worship “attendance” has doubled in the past months. It helps not to get stuck on the numbers, but to see this experience as one of the ways God is filling the containers of all who are in need of Good News. We are dropping off Bibles for young ones to read. Little ones in Parents Day Out program are being read to from a safe distance outside, giving them a sense that they are important and not forgotten. Bible studies and gatherings of youth are still happening virtual-style. People are making hundreds of masks for Food Pantry clients who are scrambling to keep themselves fed and healthy.

Pastor Robin said to me yesterday: I’ve decided my job is to manage the miracles that are continually handed to us. Indeed.

I’m sure you have many containers filling up in your lives, too, though maybe you’ve forgotten to check your inventory? For God’s sake— for your own sake— take stock now. It will help you endure. I’m preaching to myself here as well; even pastors need God’s compass points.

What I’m describing here has a name: it’s **mission**. A fancy church word which means: “here’s how God guides our way.” Trust in God’s enduring love; blessed to be a

blessing; a witness to God's abundance. *Sharing the Love of Christ*. Any one (or all) will do. It's a compass for any decision we make, doing "the next right thing," which was a mantra of P. Holmer that I love, because it's true. All we have to do is the next right thing.

With all this in mind, here's what to expect at St. John By the Mall (which I now think of as St. John/Jesus Has Left the Building) from now until the end of June, as we know in this present moment. Remember: what makes sense now may not make sense in a few weeks or months; we are only doing the next right thing, we'll adapt as needed.

Weekend Worship

Still online. Beginning May 31, we'll make the YouTube/Website worship video available at 9am while keeping the Facebook Watch Party at 10am (you're welcome, early risers).

We're not at the point to predict when we can return to in-person worship; we worship in large numbers. Some have asked: when will we return? I often say, "I don't know," which is the truth. But not knowing is not the same as doing nothing. We've been kicking around a few ideas, but really, we aren't at any point to make plans yet. There's too many variables. We are looking for the blessings now, and using our mission to guide us step-by-step. I know you yearn for worship in the sanctuary. We'll get to it, don't worry. Endure, beloved. Endure. God is giving us a way through.

Here's one way we are given a way through: the last few months have been a steep learning curve, but one of the "containers of blessings" God heaped on us was the ability to adapt to online worship, quickly. Online worship may only be a substitute for some, but it is an answered prayer for others. We have so many people who *couldn't* attend in-person worship *before* the pandemic. And, so many people who wanted to be a part of church, but needed a "next step" to get there. We're going to keep online worship going even after the pandemic is over and we return to in-person worship. We have a Legacy Gift we are dedicating to purchasing and installing live-stream cameras in our sanctuary, which is underway now. When the time comes to return to in-person worship, we'll simultaneously make that worship available online. And, we'll make a recording of that worship that can go on our YouTube Channel, so you can share it with others. I'm also hopeful we will be able to move to the sanctuary to record worship in the next month or so, so you don't have to look at that darned bulletin board of mine in the background (ha!).

Pastor Robin, Pastor Evan and I really loved the way Holy Week was planned. For the last several weeks, we've been working on getting our rhythm and systems in place, and now we are ready to do more involved planning again. For the summer months, we are planning to offer home practices that coincide with worship. Stay tuned.

Office Hours/Building Use

We will continue to suspend office hours and building use for ministries (with the exception of Food Pantry) for the month of June, to allow our staff to partially return to their offices and the building to work out the systems we have in place and adapt as needed.

Staff is moving into a hybrid-model of work for June, where we utilize our offices and virtual meetings/work. We will stagger our office use. Nobody on staff is required to work in the building. It will be by choice, and done with careful coordination and planning. It goes without saying, but we will social distance, wear masks, and do all the things we need to do to be as safe as possible.

This will be a messy phase, I'm sure, because you will see cars in the parking lot and feel the need to drop by, say hi, whatever. The church building is, for many, our "other" home and it feels strange not to have it available, doesn't it?

What I'm asking you at this time is to keep our mission in mind. Every week, we provide food for ~350 families. If someone in our building contracts COVID-19, we will implement a process of shutting down the building for deep cleaning for 7-14 days, depending on the point and duration of contact; remember, there are thousands of items of food in our building; if it's contaminated, some food will have to be thrown away if the point of contact happens near our food storage areas. We will contact everyone who was in the building, go through the process of notifying agencies for contact tracing, and provide instructions for each individual affected to self-quarantine and contact their physicians. When this happens, deliveries and distribution for Food Pantry and ALL use of building will be suspended. So, you see my point. Our individual actions are part of the whole body of Christ. Which is another one of St. Paul's Greatest Hits, by the way.

Funerals

If it's needed, we may be able to have funerals with 10 persons or less starting in June. We place a high value on gathering in unplanned numbers as God's people in times of great trouble, and the virus has circumvented this value. Limiting gatherings to small

numbers goes against the grain, but you do what you have to do. For myself and the other pastors, this is one of the hardest things to endure. We are also aware of recent findings that the virus spreads astronomically while, of all things, singing— we think up to 18 feet or so! That’s a recipe for disaster during a funeral worship- “put a group of grieving people in a room and sing and just wait and see for ourselves if this is in fact, true” is an unwise and irresponsible response. For now, if we have a funeral in June, we’re going to offer instrumental music and pre-recorded solos if needed.

I’m sure your head is going to the future with regards to singing. I do not know what else we will know in the months ahead, so I’m keeping in the present. Remember, this is a new situation for everyone, including the scientists, public servants, and lowly pastors such as myself. We will know more about the virus, it’s spread, and how we’ll manage worship in the months to come. Keep that compass point in mind.

Your Staff and Time Off: A Four-Day Mini-Sabbatical

I’m not gonna lie. The St. John staff who are currently working: we are tired. Tired to our bones. We’ve adapted and we suspended our days off to learn how to connect our church family during the last few months. It’s been good, holy work. It’s been fulfilling work, because it’s tied to the bigger vision of God.

We are also human, and the countless hours of work are taking their toll. We need two things from you right now: we need your prayers, and we need a little time off. Many of us have one or two scheduled weeks off during the summer months (one of mine is this week!), but a good old-fashioned weekend off would do wonders.

During Memorial Day weekend (Friday-Monday), working staff will be taking a mini-Sabbatical. We won’t be answering our emails, phone calls, texts, so if you can give us the space we appreciate it. It’s a mini-breather so we can do the next right thing. I’m available for emergencies this weekend— don’t hold back calling me for an emergency!! Our Church Council president, Jackie Mansholt, will be my back up because she lives in my neighborhood and can come and get me if your emergency call isn’t answered right away because perhaps I’ll be in the garden, digging around. Council members and Ellen Goodwin (who took her mini-Sabbatical earlier) are administering the online worship service, which is already done and ready to go.

My cell: 708-305-5561

Jackie’s cell: 815-355-2198

Whew! What an update! That's all for now, beloved community. I'm heading to my gardens.

Keep the faith. Love on your people. And count your containers, never forgetting there's more to come.

Pastor Jen