

5th virtual worship service in the time of Covid 19

A Faithful Response

II Corinthians 1:3-7

A nurse working at Weiler Hospital in the Bronx, New York, has written of her experiences treating victims of Covid 19. She speaks of twelve and fourteen hour shifts which fly by in a blur of “codes” (called when patients require immediate and intense intervention), quick conferences with other staff sharing techniques they've developed to reuse personal protection equipment (everybody **hopes** they're safe) and calling deaths (documenting time and cause—almost always the virus). Her dispatches do contain glimmers of light. In one she describes a practice that has spread worldwide through the medical community. Whenever a patient is known to be dying and staff has the time to do it, somebody pulls out his or her personal smart phone and makes a video call to the victim's loved ones. Sometimes the patient is conscious, often he or she is not, but whenever that call is made—and **only** when that call is made—that person does not die alone.

Weiler Hospital in the Bronx is affiliated with the Einstein College of Medicine, where our son Daniel earned his medical degree. He knows many of the staff there. Our national fascination with the numbers associated with Covid 19 has clouded our vision. They have obscured how personal this pandemic is. It affects people we know, be they victims, victims' loved ones or the professionals caring for them. It has

put distance between us. Physical distance. And emotional and spiritual distance. We must respond to this faithfully. We must spiritually connect.

The Apostle Paul wrote many letters to churches. It was the closest he could come to a video call. As he made his great missionary journeys, founding and strengthening churches, he kept in touch with churches he had left behind. The two Corinthian letters we find in the New Testament have been stitched together from as many as six letters Paul wrote the believers in that city. No doubt other Pauline Corinthian letters have been lost to history. This matters as proof of his genuine concern for those Christians. He knew they needed to believe the right things about Jesus. He knew they struggled to resist the temptations of other religions and entertainments that came to Corinth, a metropolitan city of the Roman world. He knew they suffered the same things all human beings did—and do: they mourned their dead, they lost jobs and income, they contracted mysterious and deadly diseases.

In our passage from II Corinthians, which follows only its “Hello, it’s Paul” opening, we read of “the God of all consolation”, and that we must “offer others, in their sorrows, the consolation we have received from God ourselves.” You may be aware of the backlash against the offering of “thoughts and prayers” on social media. When tragedy has struck, people have criticized those who call for thoughts and prayers, and those who give them. They call these offerings superficial, ineffective, meaningless.

Let us ponder this. If people do offer thoughts and prayers without meaning it, they have accomplished nothing. Perhaps they deserve a bit of criticism. But we offer, and receive, real consolation too often for it always to be a con. A home-bound member of this church told me this week of a deacon bringing her Easter flowers from our worship table. She said it was the best thing to happen to her in a long time and, “it brought tears to my eyes that somebody I know only a little at church could care for me that way.” Is this a sham?

When we offer real consolation it has an impact. Just as we can usually tell when somebody means it, so we can check ourselves before offering consolation. The suffering we see around us is real. Let us respond to it with genuine sympathy. And let that consolation spring from our relationship with Jesus Christ, who suffered out of love—for us. Paul tells us he has confidence the church can share in suffering **and** in consolation. And so, a few suggested ways we can offer thoughts and prayers that really mean something:

We can pray for each other. Relentlessly. Sincerely. With feeling.

We can offer to procure and deliver food and supplies for the more vulnerable among us. We can do so assertively yet sensitively, so their reflexive “No thank yous” might occasionally be turned to, “Yes, thank you!”

We can use our smart phones to connect in about seventeen different ways. Dumb phones may work only one way, but they do work.

We can help with the Friday noon food distribution at St. Stephen's up 7th St. from Central Presbyterian.

We can tell our far-flung families and friends about these video worship services.

We can work on our relationships. As someone said, "Time is what most of us have these days." Use it. What unresolved issues inhabit your marriage, your sibling relationships, your connections with other generations, your contacts at work or in the neighborhood? Try to understand the fears and pains that motivate your—and their—behavior. Use that understanding as a springboard to fix whatever has gone wrong.

We can reach out to people who feel like sitting ducks in nursing homes and retirement communities. In fact, I took my own advice and called my mother after typing that last sentence.

Use the spiritual disciplines to maintain your own faith in God. Times like these raise the age-old question of can there be a god when so much suffering happens. The answer has always been the same: God is real, God is love, God permits suffering for reasons we cannot fully understand. So pray, read the Bible, use technology to fellowship with your brothers and sisters in the church, serve the poor and vulnerable. Use those tools which strengthen your spirits, that you might offer real consolation one to another, in the power of God's Holy Spirit. In these fearsome times, we must spiritually connect. Go to it, church.