



March 14, 2020

Dear UJCC Family,

I confess I started writing this letter to you this morning; at that time, our governor's recommendation regarding the coronavirus was (and continues to be) to cancel or postpone mass gatherings of 250 or more. Now it is nearly 5pm and so much has changed just in the last several hours: President Trump has declared a national emergency. Both Fresno Unified and Central Unified have suspended classes in the last few hours. All these actions inform our discernment and response as UJCC. We want to be proactive and create an environment that mitigates or lessens the chances of spreading the virus. Thus, after much prayer and deliberation, Moderator Kevin Watkins, Rev. Rae, and I have come to the difficult decision that we will cancel Sunday morning worship this week (March 15). As we learn more information on the development of the virus, we will let you know when we can gather for worship again. We are also cancelling all weekly meetings, though our church office will remain open. You can find updates on the UJCC website (www.ujcclife.com), the UJCC facebook page, and through our automated phone system. Rev. Rae is also in the process of creating a blog on our website; we will keep it updated with information, prayers, and announcements.

I was on a conference call this afternoon hosted by the Fresno County Department of Public Health as they touched base with faith-based organizations. The information they want us to share with our communities many of you are tired of hearing, but are good reminders:

- * The importance of hand hygiene: please wash your hands frequently and thoroughly; if hand sanitizer is not available, not to worry. Good old-fashioned soap and water does the trick!
- * Touching your eyes, nose, or mouth is how germs are transmitted; refrain from touching your face.
- * Avoid close contact with people who are sick and if you're having flu-like symptoms, please stay at home.
- * Practice "social distancing:" try to keep distance of 6 feet between you and others, if possible.
- * Clean and sanitize high touch surfaces frequently.
- * Blood supplies are low, so if you and your household are healthy, please seriously consider giving blood. It was pointed out that most people going to blood centers are healthy, so this is a low-risk way you can help your neighbors.

In other information I've read, it is recommended to have 2 weeks of supplies and healthy food on hand in your home.

We do not take the cancelling of worship service lightly and, to be honest, it pains me to do so. In these circumstances, it is better to err on the side of caution. We must do all we can to be good stewards and good neighbors to create an environment that lessens the chances of the virus being spread.

At the same time, the Church has a crucial role to play as a spiritual community. When we gather, we gather in God's name. The Church facilitates sacred space—throughout history and in the present moment, in times of joy and in difficult times, it is a major source of comfort for many people. We, as the Church, are called to be a place that speaks peace and reassurance into our anxieties and spiritual yearnings. Communal worship guides us in this holy work and not holding it is difficult for me to swallow.

I'm sure you can understand the agonizing Rev. Rae, Kevin, and I have been going through. We have been holding two things in tension:

the honoring of the spiritual work of the Church and the very real public health threats. Indeed, what are we to do to?

We turn to Jesus. We seek his guidance as he reassures the disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27). I also take heart in these words: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). Communal worship is at the heart of our Christian faith; even if it doesn't happen in a church sanctuary, it is equally sacred...so we have prepared a House Order of Worship for you, dear church family! (Please find it on our website or email me if you'd like a copy.) You are encouraged to gather with a small group of family and/or friends to seek God's peace and experience God's ever-presence in this anxious time.

Together, let us lift prayers for the well-being of our entire world; we lift prayers for clerks at grocery stores, for hourly wage workers who are losing shifts, for children who don't have access to free meal programs because their schools are closed, for the physically vulnerable in our communities, for health care professionals who are working tirelessly, for our leaders as they discern and take action to protect our communities...

Ultimately, we know by faith that we are connected in spirit, if not in body, in these unprecedented times. Together, we make up the Body of Christ and we remember God is ultimately the One we look to and the One we cling to in times of uncertainty and fear. We look forward to being together in worship, fellowship, and ministry soon. Until then, may God's grace and peace be with you!

Blessings,

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