

July 12, 2020 – The Sixth Sunday after the Pentecost

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

First, I'd like to begin with a prayer which seems quite appropriate for our time and also happens to be the collect appointed for today.

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

In March I wrote my first letter to our parish community to share concerns about the COVID-19 virus and its impact on our worshipping life. In that letter I included a quote from Presiding Bishop Curry which was surprisingly prescient. He said, "The next 30-60 days at the least are simply going to be unlike anything we have experienced in recent history, even including 9/11. The dilemma of what we know and what we don't know will continue to complicate our decision making and our lives." He was quite right. I never thought I would say this, but I think he was overly optimistic. Instead of the next 30 to 60 days, in hindsight, he could have said all of 2020. This has been a surreal year and we are only halfway through it.

On May 24, we resumed in-person worship after ten weeks apart; however, recent events in our nation, in Montana, and in Yellowstone County have compelled me to reexamine how we have been operating. As most of us are aware the cases of pandemic have been increasing at an alarming rate throughout the country. While we have been testing many more people than we did in March and April, the positive rate of tests has also increased dramatically, so these cases are not simply a result of more testing – the virus is spreading more. Also, Montana has seen a large increase in our cases as well. In particular, Yellowstone County has become the hotspot of the state with at least a hundred new cases in just the past few days.

This is happening because people are not taking this situation seriously. A few weeks ago, I was waiting outside of Home Depot to have an order brought out to me and as I sat and watched people, I noticed only three people out of about 50 that were wearing masks. It seems that once the stay-at-home orders were lifted people thought that they could simply go back to normal. On the other hand, I must give thanks to everyone who has come to in-person worship at St. Stephen's for being willing to wear masks and observe social distancing.

The reality is that the number of active cases in Yellowstone County today dwarfs what it was when we ended in-person worship. There are more cases and the virus is spreading throughout all age groups, than in March.

Because of all of this, and after consulting with our senior and junior wardens, I have decided that St. Stephen's will end in-person worship effective immediately. This is not an easy decision and has been made after a few weeks of prayer and struggle. One of my most important responsibilities is the safety of everyone who enters our building and I take that quite seriously. Remember, one of the kids in Sunday School back in November said it was the priest's job to keep them safe from bears, well, I think that could be expanded to include pandemics.

I will resume leading Evening and Morning Prayer on Saturday evening and Sunday morning, respectively. These will be available on our website and on YouTube/Facebook. I also hope to find ways for us to maintain fellowship as we return to be an online-only community. If you have any suggestions about this or anything else, please feel free to contact me.

And speaking of contact... I wanted to also take this opportunity to remind people about the member directory information sheets that we sent out a few weeks ago. We have heard back from many of you, but not all. So, enclosed with this letter you will find another copy of that sheet. If you have already turned yours in, please ignore it – but, if you haven't, please take a moment to fill it out. If you have decided that you do not want to be included in the member directory, please take a moment to let us know so that we can save on postage.

As we begin this time of fasting from the Lord's Table, let us strive to maintain a sense of hope. This, too, will pass and we have faith that in the end, God wins. Please pray for the sick and the suffering, and for those who are alone. Please also remember those who care for the sick and aged as well.

Lovingly yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephen E. Searcy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the end of the last name.

Father Stephen

Suggested Resources:

- <https://globalepidemics.org/> - Produced by Harvard University and has a handy reference tool for looking at county-level statistics including an easy to understand color coding of risk levels
- <https://montana.maps.arcgis.com/> - The Montana Response COVID-19 page shows up-to-date information on cases, deaths, and hospitalizations. It is updated daily around 10 am.
- <http://www.lectionarypage.net> - Great resource for finding the readings for a given weekend (we follow Track 1)