

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Thursday, September 3, 2020

Required, Suggested, or Compelled by Grace?

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. —Philemon 8-9

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. —2 Corinthians 5:14-15

Over the recent months I have received two different surveys inquiring as to our Church family's response to the virus, and twice I have been taken aback by a similar question. The question was posed as to whether we were *requiring* or *suggesting* masks and distancing during our services, and each time I was saddened. The choice was between the heavy hand of the law or a weak appeal for cooperation, and neither warmed my heart! What does warm my heart is that we have managed to steer clear of either option, and for the gracious and cooperative spirit among the people of St. Luke's, I am most grateful.

Some will ask, "If not requiring or suggesting, how do you communicate your expectations?" (Before going any farther, let me confess that some of the posters we have put up from the State Department of Health do speak of "required" masks.) I consider our communications to the congregation a gracious, compelling appeal which has been graciously received. To modern ears that may sound even weaker than a suggestion, but not so. Our appeal is made in the same spirit of Paul in his appeal to Philemon regarding the latter's runaway slave. Philemon was a prominent churchman and a friend of Paul's, whose slave had run away and had come into the company of Paul. The Letter of Philemon (a commonly overlooked New Testament gem) was Paul's gracious appeal to Philemon for this slave's freedom—a much weightier matter than masks and distancing!

The Apostle makes a most striking and unexpected appeal to his old friend. *Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love.* Paul could have demanded Philemon's release of his slave, and people of the world may stand in amazement at his reticence to do so. Power is to be used! But Paul does not see this as the way things should work in the kingdom. Instead the appeal is made *on the basis of love*. Again, the world recoils in horror as Paul would appear to be offering the very weakest of arguments, but the Letter of Philemon demonstrates the power of the love of Jesus Christ!

Paul's argument began something like this: "Dear friend and fellow believer, remember how you were once a slave to sin but are now set free, and that connection to the Gospel came to be through my ministry? Remember how we have become brothers in Christ by God's grace? O, by the way, give some thought to your runaway slave who also has been freed from sin and has become my beloved brother in these days." Here was an appeal of love, and a very powerful one at that! Philemon was not being presented a blunt requirement, and it certainly wasn't a mere suggestion!

Well before Paul appealed to Philemon in love, Jesus our Savior appealed to us in a similar way. The Resurrection proved Jesus' sovereignty, yet Christ does not come to us demanding our obedience and loyalty. Jesus comes to us with an appeal of love, and this is a powerful appeal as it involves Christ's dying for us on a cross of agony.

I am glad that the St. Luke's family has been able to proceed in a harmonious way through this crisis, but I also know that this harmony can easily be disturbed as is happening in many congregations. We all have differing opinions, but we have found ways to work as one unified family for the honor of Christ and the Gospel. One of our elders recently suggested possible responses to those who may not willingly cooperate on a Sunday morning. (We can be grateful for leaders among us who give such careful thought to their calling and the harmony of the family!)

Some might be quick to point out that such harmony can easily be ruined by a handful of dissenters. True enough. And then I suppose that we would need to revert to requirement and law, but this would not be an uncommon scenario as many congregations have had to walk this path. But we have been able to walk in a gracious harmony, and for that we should all be grateful.

In matters of COVID response, and in all matters of life and faith, let us not be a people of the heavy hand, nor the weak plea, but let us be a people of the gracious appeal.

Blessings,

Pastor Jim

Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no sword is drawn but the sword of righteousness, and no strength known but the strength of love: we pray thee so mightily to shed and spread abroad thy Spirit, that all peoples and ranks may be gathered under one banner, of the Prince of Peace; as children of one God and Father of all; to whom be dominion and glory now and for ever. —Source Unknown