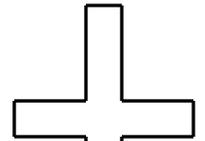


THE REFORMED CHURCH OF PORT EWEN

P.O. Box 580 | 160 Salem Street | Port Ewen, NY 12466

Reverend Kevin Slusher
kevin.slusher@rcpe.info
(845) 331-2782



03 December 2020

Dear brothers and sisters at the Reformed Church of Port Ewen,

I have some difficult news to share with you all. Due to the continued rise in Covid cases in Ulster County over the last few weeks, the consistory has decided to temporarily suspend in-person worship and all group meetings at the Reformed Church of Port Ewen as of today, December 03, 2020.

This was a hard decision for us to make. We have been in constant discussion as we have monitored the situation in our county. Not one of us wants to stop worshipping together in-person. We love you and we hate not being able to be together. But we are united in feeling that even in this we are able to show the love of Jesus to our neighbors.

We have continually sought the guidance and wisdom of Scripture in this season of life, like many of you. We find in the Bible the continual call not to claim our rights and privileges no matter the cost to those around us, but just the opposite. We see in the life and witness of Jesus, and in the words of Holy Scripture, the call to again and again lay down our lives, our rights and privileges, even at great cost to ourselves, in love for others. This is the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, and the way of life for the Church that bears Christ's holy name.

In the Letter to the Philippians we hear these words: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:2-7a).

Galatians puts it this way: "For freedom Christ has set us free. . . . For you were called to freedom brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:1a, 13-14).

Christians are free, but free for what? *Free to become slaves to each other in love. Free to lay down our lives as Christ emptied himself for us. Free to say no to the right to gather for worship out of love for our neighbors.*

Going Forward

So what does this mean for us moving forward? Well, from here we are going to try something new, worship by Zoom. Rather than offering a prerecorded sermon and worship music and an in-

home liturgy, we are going to try to worship together, simultaneously, on Zoom. Our hope is that this will increase our feeling of togetherness in worship. If you do not have the internet, you will be provided a number you can call using your phone and you can listen in on worship! We will also try to record the Zoom meeting, so that the worship service and sermon can both still be posted online for those who are unable to join us for worship at 10 AM on Sundays. We will be testing this out, and we welcome your feedback and suggestions. And please remember that these are temporary decisions. Our hope and prayer is that we can return to in-person worship!

But don't we have the right to worship!?

Some of you might be wondering why we are doing this given the Supreme Court ruling a week ago that rejected Gov. Cuomo's attempt to limit worship gatherings. We are doing this for this simple reason, and it's what I just named: laying down our rights in love for others. Just because something is a legal or political right doesn't make it morally right. To say it another way: Just because the government says we can or cannot do something doesn't mean that is how we bear faithful witness to Jesus. Yes, we may have the legal right to gather, but we are asking: "How best do we witness to our faith in these uncertain days?"

We believe that by doing this we are evangelizing! We are putting our faith into action, showing those around us a form of the love of Jesus. We are doing this *for the sake of* our gospel witness. The lawyer in the story of the Good Samaritan asked Jesus: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus completely flips the script by telling him a story about a Samaritan who is more loving than the Priest or the Levite! God is flipping the script on us too in the midst of all of this. I invite you to ask yourself: "Who is my neighbor?" It is not just the Priest and the Levite, it is not just the person in the pew next to you who is willing to go to church, who has agreed to contact tracing, and the risk of exposure. It's the person we might infect, the person who did not ask to be put at risk because Christians were unwilling to think about the needs of others.

I want to assure you. We are not making this decision out of fear. We have thought long and hard about this. We have continued to read and research the latest developments. We are making this decision with a sober mind. We make this decision not out of fear, but in the strength and confidence of Christian love, the love made known to us by Jesus. Love requires courage to suffer, courage to sacrifice. We are asking for your courage and strength. May God sustain us.

How We Got Here

How did we arrive at this decision at this time? We have been using as our threshold the numbers provided by globalepidemics.org (and covidactnow.org). This organization combines the insights of the Brown School of Public Health and the Harvard Global Institute of Health, and their work has been cited in literally dozens and dozens of different journals and news outlets. They offer recommendations based on clear metrics. According to these epidemiologists, when a community is recording 10/100,000 new daily cases, we have reached accelerated spreading of the virus and stay-at-home orders are advised. After staying well under this threshold all year, Ulster County climbed above it two weeks ago. That means that we have already been at a level at which epidemiologists recommend staying home. Their final threshold, 25 new daily cases per 100,000, goes from code orange to code red. At that point, their recommendation changes from "stay-at-home orders advised" to "stay-at-home orders necessary." On December 2, Ulster County climbed to 26.1.

We do not pretend to know everything. You might find yourself skeptical of all the numbers that are being thrown around. But we believe that humility is the posture of the Christian heart and mind. We don't presume, out of pride, to know something that no one else knows. We don't presume to know more than those who study these things for a living do. Instead, we humble ourselves and say, "You know what, I'm a pastor, I'm a teacher, I'm a retired nurse, I am not an expert on infectious diseases."

And to those of you who are skeptical of experts, ask yourself this question: Which is better? Going against experts for your own sake, or humbly receiving the wisdom of others for the sake of loving our neighbors? Even if the experts are wrong, which is a really big if, I would rather err on the side of love than freedom.

The way of Jesus doesn't say *what's best for me?* The way of Jesus says *How can I empty myself, becoming a servant, for the sake of loving others?*

Conclusion

As you process this difficult news, please, please, contact someone on consistory or me if you have any questions, concerns, affirmations, or other things you would like to share. As we suspend in-person worship, it's going to take extra effort from all of us to reach out to each other and stay in contact. May God's Spirit empower us to continue to be the Church even in difficult times.

In closing, when you are done reading this letter, as your pastor I invite you to pray. As you go before God, listen to your heart. What do you notice that you are feeling? Anger? Confusion? Relief? Name what you are feeling to God. God is big enough to handle our emotions. Let God receive all of you.

May God be our strength. The Lamb has overcome. As we struggle to be faithful, may God's Spirit empower us to take up our crosses and follow Jesus, no matter what the cost. I love you Reformed Church of Port Ewen. The peace of Christ be with you all.

In Christ, your pastor,
Kevin