

May 17, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 5 I John 3:12-20

My dear, dear friends;

I am aware these days that I am not so much posting a sermon on the Church Web site for you to read, as that like Paul, Peter, James and John, I am writing letters to you to encourage you to be faithful in a time of difficulty and trial. We are indeed dealing with something that we presumed belonged to ages ago...world wide plague. That is what Covid-19 is: a world wide plague. It has spread as all plagues have by means of people travelling. What is modern about this plague is the speed at which we travel, and the distances we can travel in hours. In a matter of weeks Covid-19 has gone around the entire world.

In this introductory portion in which I usually reassure you Barbara and I are well (we are) I want to remind you of something else. I have a responsibility for your well being as your teaching elder, and shepherd. I cancelled services when I finally understood the severity of this virus. The Prime Minister made it clear that he was out to save Canadian lives. For that reason he said, "Go home and stay home." In Peter's 1<sup>st</sup> letter chapter 5, he calls on the church's leaders to shepherd the flock. (1 Peter 5:2) Jesus further defined "good shepherds." He said, "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." That responsibility weighs heavy on my shoulders. I am supposed to take care of you and protect you. I did that when I cancelled public worship services.

At some point (sooner or later) the government is going to give us permission to return to the

sanctuary. But the conditions under which we will be allowed to do so will include seating ourselves 6 feet in every direction from our brothers and sisters, no hugging, no touching, and no guarantees of safety. I learned this week from an epidemiologist that when people sing, even wearing a cloth home-made mask, we can propel droplets (the means by which Covid-19 spreads) 26 feet. That means if John McGurk sings at the back of the sanctuary, he propels droplets two thirds of the way to the front. I would propel droplets two thirds of the way to the back. That should make you nervous. What I am saying is that just because we are given permission to return, I may not let you come to formal worship. At this point I have not heard of a Covid-19 death among us. I will do my best to protect you. And that may mean we remain in the “wilderness” a little longer than some others.

This virus has killed close to a third of a million people around the world and people are still falling ill (in Ontario more than 300 cases a day) and people are still dying every single day. Be assured that I long to be with you. I long to occupy the pulpit at St. Andrew’s. I long to sing Amazing Grace, and Rock of Ages, and Jesus Loves Me and My Faith Looks UP To Thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary, but I am bound by the word to do what a shepherd is supposed to do: keep you safe. Please, please understand. This is not about me, it is about you. I have not hugged Matthew and Rebekah, I have not been closer to them than the mileage from Belleville to Etobicoke. I am responsible to the Lord Jesus to do everything in my power to keep you well and keep you safe. If new cases of this disease are being diagnosed every day when they say churches can

meet, I will not be declaring that we get back together. If people in southern Ontario are still dying when they say 50 people can meet...I will not be letting you meet in our sanctuary. It is too important, you are too important for us to fail to bide our time.

Ron Davidson, Ardith Irvine and I have compromised immune systems. I won't tell Ron or Ardith to stay away. I know they want to worship. So do you. Keep the faith. And let us be patient. Wait, I say, on the Lord! If you think this is "Heavy" you should see what I am feeling.

Time to turn to the lesson of the day. The first letter of John chapter 3 verse 17:  
"This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another." And again I am going to say, we are witnesses to that reality. Our late dear friend, elder, Clerk of Session, my best friend in the midst of this ministry, (and I refer to our current pro tem Clerk of Session as my little sister) John was the first person I remember saying to me... "this church is my family." I know that he was not the only person among us to use that kind of language. The bonds of care and love within this fellowship are quite marvelous. On the one hand it has to do in part with the fact that some of you are Stirling "lifers". You have known one another forever. On the other hand the attitude of loving one another is sufficiently elastic that those of us who came from other places, and have been included at St. A's for a relatively short time get absorbed into the blood stream of life in this church.

One of the ministers in our Presbytery said to me several years ago, "I wish you could bottle the attitude at St. Andrew's Stirling and give doses of it like a vaccine, in other churches." We are known for our compassion, and our passionate commitment to one another. One of the things I want you to remember from the 1<sup>st</sup> epistle of the disciple of John, he who wrote the gospel of John and the Revelation of John the disciple, is that he says in this 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter "this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another."

John really got it! His passion for the Lord Jesus, spells out and works out in the midst of real life as an ethic based on sacrificial love. Love in which you and your well being are more important than "taking care of number one." He saw in the life work, the teaching of Jesus, the healing of the sick, by Jesus, HIS going to Jerusalem, knowing that the cross was in fact waiting for him, death and resurrection, waiting for HIM, that what Jesus modelled was a pattern of living where the saving of the lives of others was a first priority. And one of the things John understood was that he and the others who joined this fellowship of following Jesus as the way, meant putting the well being of others first and foremost. He sought to love others the way Jesus had loved him. Further, Jesus saw and understood that John got that message. That was the reason that from the cross Jesus deputized John to take care of Mary, HIS mother. Jesus understood John would do more than just see that she got to eat every day, had clothes to wear, he believed John would love her like his own mother.

All of that aside, John says very clearly, from the beginning this is what we called you to do. The acting out of life as a follower of Jesus, as a disciple of Jesus is supposed to be visible as being part of a “band of brothers and sisters” (the church) who love one another. And because it is visible, we can say with a measure of confidence, not pride, with confidence, we have witnessed that reality. It is a tragedy that many religious people cannot make the statement that they have witnessed the life of their community as one characterized by people loving one another, that is, concerned about the well being of the others as a priority.

And let us be clear, the amazing thing is, there are a lot of people out there in the community that are just as good at this, perhaps even better than we are. This current plague is teaching us something we assume about doctors and nurses. We tend to think they are “supposed to care” because that is their work. They get paid to care. I have not attended the bedside of a single Covid-19 patient. Imagine for a moment going to work every day and knowing you are working, living and breathing (PPE) aside, in an environment where one mistake can make you very sick, with a virus that has the power to kill. There is no magic bullet medication at this point that can make it safe. Our doctors and nurses have been living with that every day this pandemic has been in our country. The staffs of workers at nursing homes have been living with that from the time the infection broke into their facility. Imagine going to work and knowing it is a matter of time until the virus gets you.

In China there is a legend about a Canadian doctor, who served in a time of war as a front line surgeon. Dr. Bethune! When he ran out of the disinfectant he used to sterilize his hands and his surgical instruments he could have said, "I'm done!" He did not. As a result there was a generation of soldiers who survived, even though it cost Dr. Bethune his life. Bethune was born in Montreal, and he fought to save every patient that wound up wounded and on his surgical table. That kind of passion for others is supposed to run in those who follow Jesus. From the beginning this was the message. "Love one another." No exceptions. No excuses. Just do it. We have been privileged to live in a nation in which part of our heritage is that we need to, we have a duty to care for others. And a major part of the source blood of that heritage came from and comes from the Lord Jesus HIMSELF. "This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down HIS life for us." (I John 3:16) And of course it continues, "And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."

Finally, John says this in the 18<sup>th</sup> verse: "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth." And of course James, the brother of Jesus wrote in his letter, "Faith without action is dead." We are witnesses that faith without love-work (action that shows the love is real) is questionable.

Let me backtrack to the pastoral comments that began this letter to you. I have never before in 51 years of

ministry said, “Here is something I am not willing to put to a vote with the Session or the Session and the Board, or the Congregation.” I have also never before been in the position where a mistake could cost someone or a group of some-ones their lives. That is where we are, and I am.

On the positive side. Our Prime Minister said something this morning about a made in Canada vaccine going to trials. He did not elaborate. He spent about 3 sentences on it. My prayer is that they are getting close to some tangible medical help. So let us pray.

Lord Jesus: Give us the guidance of your Spirit in the hour in which we are in need of it. Walk with us in the midst of this valley of trial when we cannot meet. Help us to discern when it is safe to gather together in your name. Amen