

July 19, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 13 Psalm 65:2

Dearly Beloved;

As I write to you today, I must tell you I am beginning to be hopeful of our being able to get together to worship in St. Andrew's by the Mill Pond. The numbers for the whole of Ontario are certainly moving in the right direction. And yet, we all need to remember several things. To put it bluntly, it is still a long time until September. The Session and I will keep you posted on developments as the time draws nearer. Certainly if the numbers of cases continues to drop, and if there is no spike in new cases that causes the Province of Ontario to have to reverse its current trend on opening, and if the weather is cool enough to use the sanctuary, and if we can martial enough volunteers to help make reopening work (which means being able to follow all the rules set out by Public Health), we will have a decision to make. The Session will undertake to choose whether or not to open based on prayer, and the fulfillment of the conditions to be able to be doing so as safely as is possible. I also need each one of you to think about the fact that worship will be a different experience than it was before the Covid-19 pandemic. Gathering inside any building will present challenges, so too in our Church. What we know currently are these things. We will be learning as we go. Distancing will have to be observed (which means people are needed to volunteer to sit closer to the front of the sanctuary). We will need all of our seating to separate us adequately. Service will be shorter to get you out of the interior environment. For a time...and we do not know how long a

time...there will be no hugging, no hand shaking, no food, and no singing. Other factors will be included and we will need the willingness of everyone to follow the rules. We will need to take attendance, and we will absolutely have to have contact information on everyone who attends. If people are not feeling well (from headache to sniffles and coughs) we will need you to proactively abstain from gathering. You might well ask, why bother? Corporate worship is a unique privilege and as you know comes with its own rewards. There was always going to be a point at which we would have to try. The Session and I, are going to do our best to make a decision which has as its first consideration your personal safety. That was why I suspended worship back in March. It will still be my first, and Session's first consideration when we do consider reopening. Should we find we need more time to be able to fulfill the conditions set by Ontario and Public Health, we will have to further delay opening. Please remember us in your prayers, and pursue the Biblical precept of being as wise as a serpent and as gentle as a dove. We need you to be comfortable when the time comes, thoughtful of others, and above all wise in the stewardship of your own life, and the lives of others. I also need to say this: initially at least, the church will only reopen for the purpose of public worship. Sanitizing and disinfecting to protect that experience causes me to demand this caution, which we have not had to exercise in the past. Please, please be understanding. And now let us turn to the Word.

The text for this message is a single verse from Psalm 65. "O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh

come.” In our NIV pew Bibles it is translated this way: “O you who hear prayer, to you all men (mankind which includes both genders) will come.” I want you to notice something about the last half of verse 2 of Psalm 65. It speaks of a gathering. Of people coming together. And they do not come together, because they cannot pray in their own homes or family circles. They come together precisely because they do pray at home, and at their bedsides, and as they work, and when they dine (saying grace), and when they enjoy recreation, because the fundamental of prayer, is an act of faith. God hears our prayers. And that means so much to us, we do long to gather and share a corporate experience called worship which includes prayer, among the other means of grace.

There can be no denying that the faith to which we adhere (why else would you tune in via your computer to read this message, or to read it as a printed copy?) is something in which we want to participate as a shared experience. Faith in the living God, (which means the God who is with us in the midst of real life), faith in Jesus who saved us by shedding HIS blood on the cross in the midst of real life, and undeniable history, faith in the Holy Spirit (the God in our midst and whom we experience) causes us, like the disciples of old, to want to gather, to tell our stories, to pray, to praise God in song, to listen to what we find to be helpful and meaningful teaching. And just like the disciples of old, we do that primarily in the upper room. One of the things we have figured out...is that to get 50 people in the space, safely distanced, we will need the seating in the upper room.

That said, I have a story to share with you that happened years ago when I was the full-time minister of a congregation that was being born, that would build a church facility within 3 years of its first service. Here is the key: I was a witness to what happened then, and I am, (praise God!) a witness to what is happening even as I write this message. Sharing the story with you, we all become witnesses to these facts.

A young mother came out to one of our services. Her name was Kathy. I phoned her and I asked if it would be all right, if I came to visit her in her home. She was surprised I would do that. She invited me to come to her home. I believe it was an afternoon visit. Back in those days I always asked the question, "How did you find out about us?" because the simple fact is churches tend to be most visible when they have a building in the community. We had not started to build as I remember. She said she had received a piece of literature in her mailbox. I was walking 150 doors a day almost every morning at that point in time. So she had responded to an invitation.

I asked her why she came back a second time. She smiled. "Frankly," she said, "I wanted to see if it would happen a second time." I asked, "If what would happen?" She looked thoughtfully at me. I did not know that she was trying to figure out how far she could trust me. She said, "If HE would be there." Her lower lip began to tremble. Her eyes shone with

tears. I said, "I am not trying to be difficult, but I need to ask this question. Who are you speaking about. "Jesus," she replied. "HE was there." I replied, "I know." She visibly relaxed, and she wept. She said, "I was afraid you would think I'm crazy." I said, "I wouldn't be much of a man of faith if I thought that." She said, "I know." She became a regular, a member, and eventually one of our prayer warriors.

Some time went by. Another young mother phoned me to ask if I knew Kathy's son was in hospital. I did not. She gave me the information, as to which hospital and the room number. And I set out to make a call. It so happened that when I walked into the room Kathy was there. That should come as no surprise. She was a devoted mother, then, and now. I asked her how she was doing? We took a walk down the hall. She related the facts as calmly as she could. Gord was 6 years old. He had become ill, with an exotic blood disease caused by something he had picked up from the soil, while playing outside. I never did learn anything more specific. "So," I asked a second time, "How are you doing." She said, she was frightened. It had been made clear to her, that her son was seriously ill. I am amazed that I remember so little about his illness. But that is the truth.

We returned to his room and I asked her in front of her son, if it would be all right if I prayed for him. She said, "Please." I turned to Gord. He was small. He was so young. And I asked him if he would mind if I prayed for him. He smiled and said it was okey. I asked Kathy to join me at his bedside. I

said, "I'm going to put my hand on Gord's shoulder. I would like you to put your hand on his head." She did as I asked and I prayed that the doctors might be given great skill, that the nurses might be very kind. And then I asked Jesus to pour out HIS Spirit and heal my young friend. I don't remember a whole lot of what happened after that except that Kathy became even more involved in the life and the work of Amberlea Presbyterian Church.

Fast-forward to July 16th, 2020. As everyone knows we have been praying for and saying thank you to front line workers since the beginning of the experience of this pandemic in Canada...which for most of us is roughly mid-March, when the Prime Minister said his now famous line, "Go home, and stay home." We all went into isolation, and social distancing, that ancient strategy for fighting illness that has no magic blue pill, and no vaccine.

Well to make a long story short we got an e-mail from Kathy White. She asked the question, "Do you remember praying for Gordie when he was 6 years old and in hospital? I sure do." She asked me to pray for her son again. She asked me to pray for him that he might experience safety during this terrible pandemic and the presence of Jesus.

There was a photograph. I would never have recognized the young man in the picture. He was wearing a mask and one of those blue medical caps that people wear when they are on duty in a hospital. He is in his 3rd year of

medical studies. He is studying and working in Chicago. He is going to be a doctor. And he is on the front lines, face to face with Covid-19. I prayed for healing when he was a sick little boy. I pray for his safety now that he is a practitioner of the healing arts in a big hospital in Chicago in the country that is at the top of the list for the number of diagnosed cases, and deaths from this plague. His work is healing people. He is doing what saves lives. Please, please join me in prayer for that very special young man who is Kathy's son. We believe God. We follow Jesus. We seek the Spirit who makes people whole. And the truth is, we are witnesses, you and I.

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, Holy Spirit, three in One, One in three. We thank you for those moments in the past when we witnessed your hearing our prayers. We come to you again and again because we are witnesses to the fact that you are the God who hears the prayers we utter for YOU are Lord, God and Saviour. Be with Gordie White. We thank you that you called him to serve others in the field of medicine. We thank you for guiding and guarding his steps as life has unfolded according to your will for him and his loved ones. We ask you to protect him as he serves the people who become the principal concerns of his practice of the healing arts. Send angels to guard him when he is going on duty, pour out your Spirit upon him at the end of a shift or during a shift when he takes off the protective gowns and gloves and masks that he must use. We lift him up for your keeping and blessing as he labours to save lives and to protect his colleagues. Fill him with

the Spirit of Jesus, who came, not to be a master but to be a servant. Protect his family and be with them we ask. In Jesus name we ask these things, giving thanks for the fact that you have made us witnesses. Amen