

March 19, 2021

Dear Friends and Family of St. Matthew,

A year ago, we were all peering into a seemingly bottomless hole filled with uncertainty and a fair amount of fear. Sadly, we all have experienced the common theme of loss during this time whether it's been the loss of certain freedoms we once enjoyed, the loss of jobs, or the loss of life. Specific to our community, we have lost a year of gathering physically which has meant not celebrating, at least in our typical ways, baptisms, the Eucharist, the burial of our dead, and myriad other moments of sharing.

With so much pent up desire in our society to reclaim all the things we have lost coupled with our dominant culture's tendency to be impatient, self-oriented, and money-driven, we have reached a very interesting and dangerous phase of the pandemic. Since December, two vaccines have been authorized and available for Emergency Use with a third entering into the stream in the last few weeks. These vaccines are rightly being administered in such a way so as to prioritize the most vulnerable individuals who would most likely experience the most dire effects of COVID 19 (though the efficacy and equity of this administration is another matter). Even though the vaccines have been available for nearly four months, only a fraction of our state's adult population is vaccinated. However, depending on one's age or occupation, there are just enough folks out there who have received a vaccine to start having clusters of friends, family and colleagues who are vaccinated, giving a false sense of reality and security for those who are privileged enough to be inoculated. This phenomena skews the reality that even as our President has promised enough vaccines to be produced for every adult (that's 250 million people) by May 1st, the process of getting those shots into arms will still take months beyond that to administer.

And then there are our 80 million children. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the focus on care and vaccination has been on the adult population because the largest percentage of those receiving the worst symptoms all the way to death tended to be those who were older and/or in relatively poor health to begin with. However, as time has gone by, cases in children have developed, hospitalizations have occurred, and children have died. Children like adults can be asymptomatic carriers of the virus as well, which contributes to community spread and the increase of the likelihood of new variants developing. There is also the reality of long-term effects of the disease cropping up months after an initial (and oftentimes asymptomatic) infection making it very much to the advantage of everyone not to contract the illness at all prior to vaccination.

Yet despite the realities of exposure for all people regardless of age, we have leaders who are now moving quickly to open up our schools and other parts of our economy just as we are beginning to see some light at the end of what is still a very long and dark tunnel. Given that there are only about 12 weeks left in the academic year, it is clear that the economy, which is very important for sure, is the priority, not the wellbeing and safety of all of our people, the youngest included. This isn't to say that there are children who are grossly underserved in remote learning either by home circumstances, a lack of internet access, or the inability to access all the necessary specialized support that is often necessary. But it's hard to justify a return to indoor physical gathering when school districts that have resumed in-person gathering are already dealing with the disruptions of COVID 19 infections in classrooms and on athletic teams. Quarantine lists are lengthening for those who are exposed forcing students to stay home and children are being unnecessarily infected and listed merely as casualties within the program.

I mention all of this above and only two days after our own bishop has written his blog on the topic of re-gathering (see <http://www.bishoprickel.com/blog/pull-up-the-gangplank-im-on-board>) to give scope and perspective for our course here at St. Matthew. To be sure, the Church sees every life as more valuable than anything else including the economy. Yes, life and the economy intersect quite often, but the economy works for the living, not the other way around. I am proud that our parish was one of the first Episcopal parishes in the country to embrace emphatically an all-virtual format when everything changed a year ago. Our justification was not merely our own self-preservation, but rather to do our part in being the greatest help possible to the community at large. By our example, we have encouraged others to take seriously this disease and to take the measures necessary to slow community transmission. We have also helped people navigate months of isolation and loneliness. Our goal from the beginning was to be helpers to the end and to see this pandemic through to completion with no one being left behind.

With this said, these next 6 months are going to be critical. As more and more of the adult population is vaccinated and as the trials of vaccinations for those infant to age 16 continue (and hopefully come to completion later this year), we could be at a place, at best by this fall, where we are beginning to manage COVID 19 similarly to the flu. This means vaccinations are available to all, regardless of age or health status, and we simply live with the virus knowing some people will choose to be vaccinated and some will not. However, until we get there, limiting exposure and infections for all persons in our population is critical to reducing unnecessary complications to infection (whether short or long term) and minimizing the likelihood of further variants developing that threaten to weaken the overall efficacy of the current vaccines.

For our part, St. Matthew looks forward to physically gathering whenever vaccines are available to all persons or when the pandemic is declared officially over by the government, whichever comes first. With the assumption that the earliest availability for child vaccinations could be this fall, given the best time frame I can ascertain, the earliest we would even consider physically gathering again would be around that time. Much like our President's fantasy of people beginning to have limited gatherings by Independence Day, I too have a fantasy that we might be back together physically in some form by our triennial bishop's visitation on October 24th. However, how we engage these next 6 months by maintaining our protocols along with how well the children's vaccine trials go will determine how soon we will gather again. To get there, we must continue to love with patience and kindness (1 Cor. 13:4) and to care for everyone, especially the least of these (Matt. 25:31-46). This means not gathering until everyone has an equal choice and chance to be vaccinated, which is currently not only the best strategy toward ending this pandemic but it is also the way of God. We are in the last leg of the race. Let's get across the finish line together with Jesus.

Peace in Christ,

Kendall+