



**Upon the 125th Anniversary of the dedication of
First English Evangelical Lutheran's
1208 Race Street building:
May 12, 2020
"A Fireside Turkey Talk Chat"
By Pastor Brian Ferguson**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

F.D.R.'s Fireside Chats are being called out as examples of straight talk that many people wish our leaders would provide. **"It's time to talk turkey"**, was the phrase **Bishop Duane Pederson** used to set up his messages to pastors in northwest Wisconsin where I last served. I liked this approach because **he boldly named the reality** that the overwhelming majority of the congregations in the ELCA, and all other denominations, were in decline and we had best take note and do something.

In the spirit of F.D.R and Bishop Pederson, **I want to share with you the reality of our current situation during the Covid-19 Pandemic.** My son Nick graduated from college, via Zoom, on Saturday. Each graduate was given 15 seconds to say a few words. The Dean of the college stated that Winston Churchill was able to write the entire Allied strategy for World War II on a napkin, so 15 seconds should be enough for you to share your thoughts on graduation. Well, I'm not Winston Churchill. I can hear the chuckles of agreement already. What I need to share won't fit in a Tweet, a Facebook post or be shared during the announcement time on Sunday morning. We are in the midst of a time of great turmoil and suffering that our world has arguably only experienced a few times in all of history. **So, I ask for not only your patient attention, but also for your partnership in response.**

I would like to begin with a story from my days growing up on a hog farm in Illinois. It's not a pleasant story. It also might not be something readily relatable for many of you since you most likely did not grow up on a farm. In some ways, I think it is God's sense of humor that a pig farmer finds himself serving as a pastor at an urban congregation. The reality however is that the overwhelming majority of people who settled in Cincinnati came from farms, whether they be from the German Rhine River valley, the eastern hills of Appalachia or the southern states of Alabama and Mississippi. Oh, and let's not forget that Cincinnati was nicknamed Porkopolis and has a marathon called the Flying Pig, which I have run twice! So, most of us are only one or two generations removed from farm life and maybe even recall a grandparent telling stories about farm life. Or with urban farming a thing now your neighbor might even be raising some chickens or quail.

In the fall of 1988, my sophomore year in college, my father had a brain tumor removed. The prognosis was not good. **So, I dropped out of school to run the family farm as best I could.** During that winter the baby pigs began to die shortly after they were born. A litter of 13 might have 3 pigs survive. My father was able to give me guidance as something like this had happened before and he was able to resolve the situation. He instructed me to thoroughly clean the pens and then spray diluted Clorox bleach on all the surfaces. I did this for several days. I still can feel my eyes burning from the bleach aerosols in the air. I'd rush out into the cold January air in northern Illinois for relief. Yet, the pigs continued to die. I hauled them out in a wheelbarrow by the hundreds.



It was at church one Sunday when hope arose. No, not from an inspirational sermon or prayer. Our veterinarian, Doc Stevenson, was a member of the church and he happened to ask how things were going. I told him and he instructed me to bring in one of the dead pigs to his clinic. I did so early on Monday morning. The next day, Doc Stevenson called and said he would be out to give the sows a shot. The mothers of the babies were the source of the illness. I had been working tirelessly doing something that wasn't making a bit of difference. The only positive thing was that I felt like I was doing something to fix the problem.



Maybe good for me but certainly no help in solving the problem. There was no impact on the final outcome. **What immediately solved the problem was a medical expert** who could diagnose the problem and then provide the correct treatment. The whole experience was frustrating and discouraging for someone receiving a college education. Beyond my own sense of failure, there was a much more significant matter. The picture of the farm shows the farm and fields I worked in 1989. **What the picture doesn't show is the economic impact of losing 75% of one cycle of litters.** I went back to school but by the time I graduated dad's cancer had returned and our family had filed for bankruptcy.

We are in a similar situation today. **Except, we have the benefit of already having the medical experts' diagnosis.** We need a vaccine. A vaccine which needs to be discovered and then shared with all the people on earth. That's 7,655,957,369 people as of 2018. This won't happen in a month or even a year. 12 months is being lifted up as the best case for a vaccine discovery. **The Bishop of the Indiana/Kentucky Synod is using 18-24 months as a timeframe for a vaccine discovery and vaccinations to be completed.**

We could buy all of the Purell hand sanitizer and Clorox Cleanup on the market but that won't solve the problem. **The problem, according to science that is not influenced by politics or economics,** is that the most significant risk is presented by one infected person, most often asymptomatic, with the Covid-19 virus breathing in an enclosed space for an extended period of time will infect others, whether they are six feet or sixty feet apart. **The majority of events at First Lutheran involve large groups of people gathering in close proximity for extended periods of time.** This means that until scientific evidence, free of political and economic influence, can prove otherwise we should not gather or host events at First, except under the strictest guidelines, which will be quite difficult for First to implement and enforce. **So, what are we to do? Let's come back to that in a bit.**

May 12, 1895 – May 12, 2020 **125 Years of Ministry at 1208 Race Street!**

Today is the 125th anniversary of the dedication of our building in 1895. It was a beautiful day with many speakers, a full house, and wonderful organ music. This should be a significant milestone event for our faith community. We should have been gathering to recall the ministry that has happened on Race Street. We could have been celebrating the recent restoration work completed and revealed plans for the Community Campaign to **stabilize the bell tower** and **install an elevator**. Along with this we might have been ready to **announce the hiring of a second pastor**. Instead, the building is empty and all of our current dreams have been put on hold. **All we seem to be left with is the opportunity to recall the good old days.**

This reminds me of the **story of the Israelites in Jerusalem when they laid the foundation for the rebuilding of the Temple after it had been destroyed.**

“And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹²But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.” Ezra 3:11-14

Many people wept because the new Temple wasn’t going to be as magnificent as the first one. They were grieving what was lost. Certainly, we can relate to them. **It is natural to mourn what we have lost, even if it is temporary.** But, there was another group present when the foundation was laid in Jerusalem. This group shouted for joy because they were witnessing a resurrection moment. **I encourage you, in the midst of grief, to not let the tears of sorrow cloud your ability to see the resurrection moment at hand.**

So, what are we to do? Let’s return to that question. **On April 30, the First Lutheran Leadership Team met to discuss this very question. Our discussion was informed by the following:**

- Current agreed upon medical information related to health risks
- Guidelines mandated by the State of Ohio and the CDC
- Ability to implement mandated guidelines if we were to gather, such as having enough masks, cleaners, hand sanitizer, maintenance of social distancing, etc.
- Needs of current membership
- Needs of the greater community
- Willingness of First’s volunteers and staff to host and serve at events
- Willingness of First’s members to attend a worship gathering
- Recommendations by Bishop Suzanne Dillahunt of the Southern Ohio Synod
- Recommendations by several additional church leaders
- Legal and insurance liability considerations if we were to gather
- Evidence that large gatherings are the source of virus spread
- Our unique urban context and inability to safely manage the unexpected
- Whether the services we offer are essential for the community
- Resources of time and leadership to make a safe gathering possible
- Resources of time and leadership to manage event venue requests

This list reveals the complexity involved in deciding how to respond to this current situation. It certainly is possible to take one or two items on the list and problem solve them. But when you put them all together you quickly learn that none of the considerations are mutually exclusive. One simple example is that we could decide to host a gathering, but **if we do not have enough volunteers or staff willing to work at the event then we obviously cannot hold it.** Another example is we could decide to offer an in person worship service that follows all of the recommended guidelines, but if very few people feel comfortable attending the service, then it becomes a **question of how we could better use our time to improve the ways we connect with the majority of people who are not yet willing to come out.** Do we spend time wiping down all of the pews for the benefit of a few or do we use that same time instead to improve our online worship experience which benefits many?

After much discussion, the Leadership Team made the following decisions:

- Our investment of time and resources for ministry will be guided by the assumption that it will take 12-18 months for a vaccine to be discovered and for people to be vaccinated.
- Our decisions will be informed by the recommendations of the State of Ohio's health department and the CDC. We anticipate that these guidelines will fluctuate as the virus has flare ups.
- We will continue offering, and seek to improve, online virtual ministry for the 12-18 month period.
- We will begin to offer Holy Communion during Zoom worship once each month. The first Communion will be on Pentecost Sunday, June 7.
- We will seek to discover how to serve our community in new ways that better align with our current volunteer and financial resources.
- We will not accept any new event venue requests.
- Recognizing that we will not be gathering in person for a while the difficult decision was made to furlough Ben Heller and Robert Malone. Both Ben and Robert were paid for the last two months while we have been closed. Both Ben and Robert will have the opportunity to return as active staff when their availability, interests and skills match the needs of our new reality.
- We will honor any commitments remaining on our event calendar so long as they comply with our guidelines for safety.
- Since we are not able to provide a safe environment for volunteers, staff, and guests we will not be offering our monthly clothing and meal distributions. Before making this decision we identified that other agencies continue to offer support, in a safe manner, to those who we regularly serve. We have, and will continue, to financially support those organizations.
- The Leadership Team will review First Lutheran's guidelines on the last day of each month and make prudent adjustments to our guidelines for our ministry.

The Leadership Team made the decisions about our ministry, as you can see, using a great deal of information. **I could have shared everything so far in a simple and concise one page letter. But I believe the decisions we are making, and actions we will be taking, are of such significance that everyone should be aware of how they came to be. For the road thus far, and the road that lies ahead, has and will be filled with a great deal of critical assessment.** I deeply hope and pray that next week a vaccine is discovered and by July we can be back together. In which case we will joyfully discard all of this. But if not, we now have a plan for ministry. A plan that helps us to not just survive but rather thrive.

When people ask, "What is First doing to help the community", what should we say?

It might seem that there is very little that we have to offer the community when our building is closed. Not so. We have already distributed seven \$500 donations to agencies within one mile of First still actively serving our neighbors. This is a good start. **We can do more. We must be mindful that these are funds we had already planned on giving away before there was a financial crisis. I want to challenge our faith community to give a significant amount more away to better reflect the level of sacrifice necessary during such a time as this.**

We recently applied for a Paycheck Protection Program loan and were notified in the second round that we were approved. But due to the new certifications added to the second round related to available liquid assets and loss of income I could not in good faith sign the loan documents. First has a strong cash reserve and our offering income is up by 15% from last year as of April 30. This might seem like a missed opportunity. **My hope is that the \$20,000 we would have received as a grant will instead go to a small business owner who might not otherwise be able to keep their doors open and employees working.**

We are currently under a stay at home order in Ohio and we are also being told that businesses can start to reopen. This bizarre juxtaposition was reflected in the U.S. Senate hearing today, when Dr Anthony Fauci and U.S. Senators made their cases for why we should stay home and why we should open the economy. **There is a very real need to open our economy.** Yes, there are problems with inequalities in our current system but the reality remains that **a great many people in our society are dependent upon government programs and financial support.** Add to this the reality that police, fire fighters, city water and sewer, courts and countless other services are all funded by tax income. **Tens of millions of people are unemployed. They are no longer paying federal, state and local income taxes. Instead they are necessarily drawing down existing unemployment fund reserves.** So long as businesses are closed and not able to sell their products there are no sales taxes being collected. So long as people are not driving they are not generating gas taxes which pay for the maintenance of our infrastructure. We cannot leave our economy shut down at current levels for 12-18 months.

So, how can First Lutheran help? **By not hosting large gatherings of people we are helping to minimize the risk of an outbreak of the virus.** Last week the Washington Post published an article on Over-the-Rhine. They stated that of the 5,400 people living in the neighborhood there had been only three reported cases of Covid-19. This means that people and business who need to be out and open can have a relative sense of security. **If First Lutheran were to host an event, which was not essential, that led to an outbreak of the virus in OTR we would be the source of unimaginable economic devastation. First is serving our neighbors by not being open. We are maximizing the safe space in our community for those who truly need to be out.**

No longer Noah's Ark...instead back to the beginning

For the first month of our time being isolated I found the story of Noah to be helpful. Noah was told to patiently wait on the ark until the flood waters receded, at which time he would be able to return to dry land. **That worked when we had some hope of getting off the ark in a reasonably short time. Biding our time in patience doesn't seem to be what God has in mind for us.** I am now lifting up the Creation story found in Genesis 1. You know the one that starts, "In the beginning..."? A recent lesson with two of our middle school aged youth, Liam and Cole revealed the message. When asked what thing God said again and again in Genesis 1, Liam said "Let" and "Let there". Well, the answer I was expecting to hear was, "It was good". But Liam was right too. **God says, let there be this and let there be that over and over.** These words put the emphasis on the active powerful work of creating. **It is a reminder that we have a creating God.**

Our God did not say, "that's it I'm never creating anything ever again". We believe that God is living and active, even now. Or should we say, especially now. Stop and think of the new things you have encountered in the last two months. **I am calling you to claim the words of Jesus who just a few weeks ago on doubting Thomas Sunday, said, blessed are those who have not seen but believe. Believe that during the next year God will reveal countless new creations that will help us share the love of God in ways we cannot yet see.** We have already been given a glimpse of what is coming into being. 125 years ago today, the people of First were at day one in their new building, and were imaging what could be. We too are now at day one. On day one we could imagine God said, "Let there be Zoom Worship!" What will God create on day two?

Thank you for sharing your time to hear this message. I hope that you will be encouraged and find hope in it. I also hope that you will join me and the rest of the First community as we journey together through these difficult, yet hope filled days.

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